

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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COMMENTARY

Beyond Maui

Wildfire Risk, Emergency Management Policy, and the Island Communities That Are Next

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Before August 8, 2023, Lahaina had not burned in living memory. The community's relationship with wildfire risk was theoretical. After Lahaina, wildfire risk is no longer theoretical anywhere in Hawaii or the Pacific.¹ The question for policymakers is not whether island communities are at risk — they demonstrably are — but which communities are most vulnerable and what policy interventions can meaningfully reduce that vulnerability.

The Island Wildfire Risk Profile

Island wildfires present a different risk profile than the forest fires that dominate continental wildfire policy.² Hawaii's most devastating fires burn through dry grassland and former sugarcane fields — fast-moving fires that can cover large distances in minutes, that do not respond to conventional firebreak strategies designed for forest terrain, and that can reach populated areas far faster than wildland-urban interface fire models calibrated on forest fire spread rates predict.

The Lahaina fire's catastrophic speed was produced by the interaction of dry conditions with the extreme wind event generated by Hurricane Dora passing south of the islands. This wind-fire interaction — a normal weather pattern producing an extreme fire behavior outcome — is a recurring risk pattern in Hawaii's climate that emergency management frameworks must treat as a design scenario rather than an outlier.

Communities at Risk

ISPI's geographic analysis of Hawaii's island communities identifies the three-factor vulnerability profile documented in Lahaina — dry fuel adjacency, limited evacuation route capacity, and inadequate warning infrastructure — as present in multiple other Hawaii communities that have not experienced major wildfire events but face comparable structural risk conditions.

ISPI Recommendations

1. Commission a comprehensive wildfire risk assessment for Hawaii communities identifying all areas with the three-factor vulnerability profile and prioritize policy interventions for the highest-risk communities.
2. Develop Hawaii-specific grass and shrubland wildfire behavior models reflecting island vegetation types, topography, and wind patterns rather than continental forest fire models.
3. Mandate community-level wildfire preparedness planning for all Hawaii communities identified as high-risk, with specific requirements for shelter-in-

place protocols, pre-positioned supplies, and multi-channel warning dissemination.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ABOUT THE ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

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