

Maui Recovery and Emergency Management Reform: Three Years After Lahaina

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three years after the August 8, 2023 Lahaina wildfire killed more than 100 people, Hawaii faces a consequential policy question: have the emergency management frameworks that failed on August 8 been reformed, or has the \$2 billion federal recovery investment been directed primarily toward reconstruction while the framework failures that produced the disaster remain unaddressed? ISPI's analysis examines the four specific framework failures identified in the Lahaina emergency management record, assesses what has changed in Hawaii's county emergency management plans since August 2023, and provides an independent assessment of whether Hawaii's island communities are meaningfully better prepared for the next major emergency event.

KEY FINDINGS

- The August 8, 2023 Lahaina wildfire produced the deadliest American wildfire in over a century — in a community with a FEMA-compliant emergency management plan, trained emergency managers, and a functioning EOC.
- ISPI's analysis identifies four specific framework failures: mass notification architecture not designed for simultaneous channel degradation; evacuation route capacity insufficient for Lahaina's geography; mutual aid resources located 2,500 miles away; and EOC information architecture dependent on degraded infrastructure.
- Over \$2 billion in federal disaster funding has been secured for Maui recovery — but recovery investment and emergency management framework reform are distinct activities. Investment in reconstruction does not automatically produce investment in framework reform.
- Continental emergency management frameworks — NIMS, EMAC, standard COOP guidance — contain design assumptions that structurally fail in island geographic contexts. Reform that does not address these design assumptions will not prevent the next island emergency management failure.

- Hawaii is the only U.S. state with two island counties — Maui and Hawaii — both of which face documented emergency management framework gaps that ISPI's Island Emergency Management Framework is designed to address.

What Failed on August 8, 2023

The Lahaina wildfire emergency management record contains four specific framework failures that ISPI's analysis has documented in detail.

Mass notification architecture was designed for single-channel degradation — not the simultaneous loss of cellular, internet, and broadcast infrastructure that a fast-moving island wildfire produces. When the fire degraded the primary notification channels, the backup channels failed simultaneously rather than activating.

Evacuation route capacity assumed dynamic rerouting options that Lahaina's road network did not provide. A community with limited road access cannot execute standard evacuation protocols when those roads are compromised by the same emergency event that triggers evacuation.

Mutual aid resources were 2,500 miles away on the mainland — too far to provide meaningful acute-phase support. NIMS's scalable mutual aid assumption fails structurally in Hawaii because the nearest mutual aid staging area is across an ocean, not across a county line.

EOC information architecture depended on commercial telecommunications infrastructure that the fire had already degraded when the EOC needed it most. A communication architecture that assumes infrastructure survival cannot function in infrastructure-disrupting emergencies.

The Reform Gap

ISPI's review of publicly available county emergency management plan documentation finds that Hawaii's post-Lahaina emergency management reform has focused primarily on equipment procurement, staffing additions, and wildfire mitigation — critical investments that do not address the framework design failures that produced August 8's outcome.

Framework design reform requires identifying the specific continental assumptions embedded in existing plans and replacing them with island-reality alternatives. It requires answering questions that standard FEMA guidance does not ask: What is your mutual aid assumption when the nearest mutual aid is 2,500 miles away? What is your communication architecture when primary infrastructure fails? What is your evacuation protocol when primary roads are compromised?

These questions have answers. ISPI's Island Emergency Management Framework provides them. The reform gap is not a knowledge gap — it is a policy implementation gap.

What Island-Reality Reform Requires

Self-Sufficiency Primacy

Island emergency management plans must be designed around the assumption that the acute response phase will be managed entirely from pre-positioned local resources. This is not a counsel of pessimism — it is an operational reality that planning must account for.

30-Day Community Reserve Architecture

ISPI recommends a minimum 30-day community reserve standard for food, pharmaceuticals, fuel, and medical supplies — not as household preparedness, but as community-level strategic architecture. The 72-hour standard is inadequate for island supply chain realities.

Communication Redundancy Without Infrastructure Dependence

Emergency communication architecture must be designed to function without commercial telecommunications infrastructure — using radio mesh networks, satellite communication, and pre-positioned communication equipment that survives the emergency events most likely to occur.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Commission an independent assessment of all Hawaii county emergency management plans against ISPI's Island Emergency Management Framework criteria — establishing a documented baseline of post-Lahaina reform progress.
- 2.** Adopt the 30-day community reserve standard for Hawaii county strategic reserves — formally replacing the 72-hour FEMA household preparedness standard as the community-level benchmark.
- 3.** Require all Hawaii county emergency management plans to explicitly address the four Lahaina framework failures: mass notification, evacuation routing, mutual aid, and EOC communication architecture.
- 4.** Establish a Hawaii Island Emergency Management Cooperative to develop maritime mutual aid frameworks for inter-island resource sharing — creating the mutual aid alternative that EMAC cannot provide for island communities.
- 5.** Advocate for FEMA to formally recognize island communities as a distinct emergency management jurisdiction type requiring adapted framework standards.