ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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WHITE PAPER

Island Emergency Management Framework

Replacing Continental Assumptions With Island-Reality Design Across Five First Principles

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The Incident Command System, NIMS, Emergency Management Assistance Compact, and federal COOP frameworks were built in every essential design element for continental communities — and fail structurally in island contexts because of design incompatibility, not implementation failure.**
- **ISPI's Island Emergency Management Framework is built on five first principles that differ fundamentally from continental assumptions: self-sufficiency primacy, shelter-in-place as co-equal primary strategy, pre-positioned community reserve architecture, communication redundancy without infrastructure dependence, and maritime mutual aid frameworks.**
- **The 2023 Maui wildfire is a documented case of continental framework failure in an island context across four specific dimensions: mass notification architecture, evacuation route capacity, mutual aid timeline, and EOC information architecture.**
- **Implementation requires policy reform at three levels: federal guidance reform, state and territorial infrastructure investment, and community-level preparedness planning calibrated for 30-day — not 72-hour — self-sufficiency.**

On the morning of August 8, 2023, a wildfire driven by hurricane-force winds moved through Lahaina faster than the town could run.[1] The warning sirens did not sound. The wireless emergency alerts arrived too late for many residents to act on them. The primary evacuation route was blocked by the fire itself. More than 100 people died — the deadliest American wildfire in over a century — in a community that had a comprehensive emergency management plan, trained emergency managers, and a state emergency management infrastructure that was doing everything the frameworks told it to do. The frameworks were wrong.

I. What Continental Frameworks Assume

The National Incident Management System's foundational principle is scalability — the capacity of emergency response to expand as needed by drawing on mutual aid resources from beyond the affected jurisdiction.[2] FEMA's Continuity Guidance Circular assumes that essential government functions can be relocated to alternative facilities at sufficient geographic distance. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact assumes that neighboring states can provide personnel, equipment, and resources within timeframes that meaningfully reduce emergency impact. Each of these assumptions is sound for continental communities. Each fails structurally for island communities.

> **The nearest mainland mutual aid resources to Maui are approximately 2,500 miles away. The first significant federal resources reached Lahaina after the critical window for effective emergency response had already closed. This was not a mutual aid system failure — the system performed as designed. It was a design failure.**

II. The Five First Principles of Island Emergency Management

Principle 1: Self-Sufficiency Primacy

Continental emergency management is designed around the principle of scalable response — that resources from outside the affected jurisdiction will arrive within a timeframe that meaningfully reduces impact. Island emergency management must be designed around the inverse principle: that outside resources will arrive too late to affect the acute response phase, and that the community must be capable of managing that phase entirely from pre-positioned local resources.[3]

Principle 2: Shelter-in-Place as Co-Equal Primary Strategy

Continental emergency management treats evacuation as the primary emergency response strategy and shelter-in-place as a secondary option. Island emergency management must treat shelter-in-place as a co-equal primary strategy because island geography creates evacuation constraints that continental communities do not face — limited road network capacity, concentrated coastal populations, and topography that places high-elevation shelter destinations at the end of road networks passing through the most hazard-exposed terrain. The Lahaina wildfire made this visible in the most consequential possible way.

Principle 3: Pre-Positioned Community Reserve Architecture

Continental emergency management relies on supply chains that can be activated during emergencies to deliver resources within hours or days. Island emergency management cannot rely on these supply chains because they are unavailable during the acute phase of major island emergencies. Community reserve architecture — the systematic pre-positioning of emergency supplies at community level — is the island-specific alternative. ISPI's analysis of documented supply disruption durations in Hawaii and Pacific Island emergencies indicates that community reserves must be sized for a minimum of 30 days — not the 72-hour target that continental planning prescribes.[4]

Principle 4: Communication Redundancy Without Infrastructure Dependence

Island emergency management frameworks consistently identify telecommunications infrastructure failure as among the most consequential early failures in major island emergency events. Communication redundancy for

island communities requires channels that do not depend on shared telecommunications infrastructure: amateur radio networks, satellite communication terminals, community alert networks using radio frequencies independent of commercial telecommunications, and community-level notification systems that function without electronic infrastructure if necessary.

Principle 5: Maritime Mutual Aid Frameworks

For Hawaii specifically, inter-island mutual aid — the systematic sharing of emergency resources between Hawaiian islands — is a more achievable mutual aid framework than mainland mutual aid during the acute response phase. Pre-staged emergency resources on multiple islands, combined with inter-island maritime and air delivery protocols, can provide mutual aid support within hours rather than days.

III. The 2023 Maui Wildfire: A Framework Failure Case Study

ISPI's analysis of the available post-incident record identifies four specific framework failures in the Lahaina wildfire response.[5]

> **Mass Notification Architecture Failure: The notification system was not designed for the specific scenario in which all channels might be degraded simultaneously — precisely the scenario that a major fast-moving emergency in an island community produces.**
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> **Evacuation Route Capacity Failure: The emergency management plan's evacuation protocols did not include viable alternative routing for the fire-blocked primary route — because there was no viable alternative in the road network. The continental planning assumption that emergency managers can dynamically reroute evacuation traffic was structurally inapplicable to Lahaina's road network.**
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> **Mutual Aid Timeline Failure: A mutual aid system designed for continental resource delivery timelines cannot provide meaningful acute-phase support to island communities 2,500 miles from the nearest mainland staging area. This was a design failure, not a system failure.**
>
> **EOC Information Architecture Failure: EOC coordination during the acute phase was compromised by the simultaneous failure of the communication infrastructure that EOC coordination depends on. The EOC's information architecture did not include protocols for coordination under conditions of near-total communication failure.**

IV. Policy Recommendations

1. Reform federal emergency management compliance requirements for island and non-contiguous territory communities — developing island-specific compliance standards that recognize design incompatibilities between continental frameworks and island geographic realities.
2. Mandate community-level emergency supply reserves for all Hawaii counties and Pacific Island territories at levels adequate for 30-day community self-sufficiency, funded through state capital appropriations and reformed federal emergency preparedness grants.
3. Establish a formal inter-island mutual aid framework for Hawaii with pre-staged resources on multiple islands, designated inter-island maritime and air delivery protocols, and coordination mechanisms that function under degraded communication conditions.
4. Require multi-hazard mass notification architecture for all Hawaii counties with multiple redundant alert channels and specific protocols for each alert type that account for the behavioral responses appropriate to each hazard.
5. Commission ongoing island emergency management research through ISPI and similar institutions — grounding policy reform in island-specific evidence rather than continental framework adaptation.

V. Conclusion

The 100 people who died in Lahaina on August 8, 2023 died in an emergency management environment that was doing what the frameworks told it to do. The frameworks were not designed for the geographic reality of the community they were supposed to protect. Island communities deserve emergency management frameworks designed for island geography. ISPI accepts commissions for island emergency management framework development, emergency preparedness gap analysis, COOP planning, and post-incident policy analysis. Contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me or visit ispiglobal.com/commission.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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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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