



DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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WILDFIRE & DROUGHT LOOKOUT! RAMPS UP FOR PREDICTED PROLONGED DROUGHT

Fire Agencies Introduce New Alert Tools and Resources

(HILO, HAWAII ISLAND) – Don't let the winter's rains fool you into thinking Hawaii won't experience devastating wildfires anytime soon. As part of the annual Wildfire & Drought LOOKOUT! campaign, forecasters warned, the islands will begin experiencing drought conditions late this summer, that could extend all the way through next winter.

During a news conference today, at the Hawaii County Civil Defense Agency to kick-off the statewide wildfire awareness campaign, Derek Wroe of the National Weather Service warned of weather complacency. "While everything is green and lush right now, we are expecting below average rainfall, as we enter the dry season in Hawaii. Our long-range modeling shows that even our normally wet winter (2023-2024) will be abnormally dry."

This means all that green vegetation now, will not only be more abundant, but will have a longer period of time to dry out...providing more potential fuel for wildland fires.

Mike Walker, State Protection Forester for the DLNR Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) reminded everyone that wildfire season in Hawaii, is now and will continue to be a year-round phenomenon, due to warming climate conditions.

"Much of Hawaii's landscape, particularly in fire-prone areas is dominated by invasive fountain grass. It is fire adapted and is flammable throughout the year and even more so during drought periods," Walker said. Dry fountain grass has helped fuel most of the large wildfires on Hawaii island.

The Wildfire & Drought Lookout! is a collaborative effort of virtually every fire prevention and response agency in the state. It is coordinated by the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization (HWMO). This was the first time since the initiative started in 2016 that the kick-off news conference has been held somewhere other than O'ahu and is focusing on Hawaii Island, which has experienced the largest wildfires in recent years. Both the

40,000-acre Mana Road fire in 2021 and last year's 17,000-acre Leilani fire were fueled by invasive grasses.

These are some of the fire prevention and mitigation initiatives announced by partner agencies.

Hawai'i County Civil Defense Agency

Civil Defense Administrator Talmadge Magno is the voice Hawai'i Island residents often hear in times of emergency. He also leads the Big Island Wildfire Coordinating Group which is readying the roll out of predefined, evacuation preparedness threat levels, patterned on NWS weather warnings.

"The beginning of this whole process started with trying to outreach with the various fire agencies to accomplish getting better communications with communities. It was apparent that fire matches other natural disasters as far as advisories, watches, and warnings. We've come up with a color-coded scale to match each level," Magno explained.

Language for each evacuation level is still being finalized but expected to be ready this summer.

Hawai'i County Fire Department

Assistant Chief Darwin Okinaka is one of the driving forces behind the Wildfire Home Risk Assessor Program. Now available for homeowners in any of the current sixteen Firewise USA® communities in Hawai'i, the free service brings trained wildfire risk assessors to your home.

During a recent assessment at a home in Waimea, Okinaka told the homeowner, "We're not going to be able to save every home threatened by a wildfire. But, if you prepare your home and minimize hazards and fire risks, you're protecting yourself. That's one less thing that firefighters would have to do. You're essentially helping yourself, helping us to help you, and keeping your home and livelihood safe."

Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization

As the clearing house for all things wildfire related, HWMO continues to introduce new initiatives and provide coordination across agencies for wildfire messaging.

"To compliment the statewide, Firewise USA® program, HWMO and the Hawai'i County Fire Department are partnering to pilot a large landowners wildfire working group. This will allow for peer learning and help build capacity for wildfire planning and mitigation on large land tracts," explained HWMO Co-Executive Director Elizabeth Pickett.

HWMO will connect large landowners and land managers to find grant opportunities to assist with fuel-reduction projects. The organization also has a wealth of resources available for landowners and homeowners to help them become more firewise.

All of the Hawai'i Island initiatives and programs are available to share statewide. Hawai'i's wildfire issue is caused by both fuels and human ignitions and the message is, both need to be reduced and managed in both residential areas and on undeveloped/wildland areas.

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RESOURCES

(All images/video courtesy: DLNR)

HD video – Hawai'i Island evacuation preparedness threat levels (May 23, 2023):

<https://vimeo.com/833708799>

(Shot sheet attached)

HD video – Wildfire Home Risk Assessor Program (April 19, 2023):

<https://vimeo.com/823573913>

(Shot sheet attached)

HD video – Leilani wildfire, Hawai'i Island (August 12, 2022):

<https://vimeo.com/739113046>

Photographs - Hawai'i Island evacuation preparedness threat levels (May 23, 2023):

Photographs – Wildfire Home Risk Assessor Program (April 19, 2023):

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/tvzevab9y1eqauzkgx6e8/h?dl=0&rlkey=c4hehlfeujqt5tj46q4n2b49w>

Leilani wildfire, Hawai'i Island (August 12, 2022):

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/lmmokd173pk61prz1a2ej/h?dl=0&rlkey=a54smn36arsvcquyqvvrhq5kv>

Resources for media, landowners, homeowners, and fire agencies:

<https://www.hawaiiwildfire.org/home>

<https://www.hawaiiwildfire.org/lookout>

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