

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor

Hearing on “Investigating the Role of Electric Infrastructure in the Catastrophic Maui Fire”

September 28, 2023

Just over seven weeks ago, powerful wildfires devastated the Town of Lahaina on the island of Maui in Hawaii. This was a sudden and horrific tragedy. On behalf of the Democratic side, I extend our sincere condolences. Nearly one hundred people died and many more have lost their homes and businesses. The first-hand accounts of how quickly the fire spread — and the chaos and confusion that resulted -- are horrendous.

Many Hawaiian neighbors, military service members and the Coast Guard raced to rescue people that day. They worked through the smoke, flames and pollution to save lives. They are heroes. Many others responded in the immediate aftermath, and more are on the ground now dedicated to recovery and relief. I understand that over 27 federal partners including FEMA, EPA, the U.S. Army, and the Small Business Administration are helping the people of Maui get back on their feet. I appreciate the “hand-on” approach of Reps. Tokuda and Case and Sens. Hirono and Schatz and how they support and advocate for their neighbors. Top of mind for Congress at this moment of a threatened government shutdown must be to ensure that the recovery work continues uninterrupted for the people of Maui.

Today, I hope that we can learn more about the conditions that caused the fire and what else Congress can do for the island. There are things that we do know already. We know that strong winds from a nearby hurricane, combined with drought conditions and dry vegetation, led to advance warnings of fire weather on Maui. We know that a fire started on the edge of town in Lahaina on Maui’s West Coast and quickly grew out of control, ultimately devastating the town and claiming the lives of at least 97 people. Fire crews were dealing with another fire miles away as well.

We know that people there are still suffering from the losses of their friends, families, and homes, and that firefighters are still working to fully contain wildfires elsewhere on the island.

What we do not yet know is the exact cause of the fire and what more, if anything, could have been done to prevent it from starting or spreading. Hawaiian Electric has said that one of its power lines ignited an earlier fire in Lahaina the morning of August 8. The Maui Fire Department said that it had extinguished that fire. But then, fire was reported again in the same location, and it quickly spread.

Investigations are underway by the Hawaii Attorney General’s Office and the Maui Fire Department, with assistance from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

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While the National Weather Service in Honolulu began issuing alerts days before the Lahaina fire began, important questions remain about whether more could have been done to notify residents or de-energize power lines sooner. There are also critical questions about the steps local officials took in the five years since wildfires struck Maui in 2018.

These are important questions that are already being investigated. And while I strongly believe that we in Congress have an important oversight role to play, I do think it would have been helpful to have the benefit of the on-the-ground findings from the authorities before pulling the attention of our witnesses away from recovery efforts to appear before us.

Nonetheless, I appreciate their willingness to attend and hope that we can learn more about this tragedy, whether and how it might have been prevented, and what can be done to prevent future tragedies like this, including ensuring investments made for grid hardening under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act are delivered quickly and effectively. I would also like to learn about how important electric and other infrastructure can be rebuilt in a more resilient way.

It has only been seven weeks since the Lahaina fire and the emergency is not over. Investigators deserve time to do their work thoroughly and present their findings. Until we get a clearer picture, our primary focus must continue to be on relief and recovery efforts for the people of Maui, and that includes keeping the government open and ensuring federal resources are available to them.

I yield back.