

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

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

September 28, 2023

The wildfires that swept through the town of Lahaina on August 8th were a catastrophic disaster, and I want to offer my deepest sympathies to all those affected. It is a devastating tragedy, and we must ensure that Congress supports the island every way we can.

There are many unanswered questions about how this terrible tragedy happened. I’m not going to go through all the things that have already been mentioned by my colleagues in terms of what actually happened or what we know, but I know that first responders tried to contain the blaze and some residents were able to evacuate, but tragically, it wasn’t enough. The fire was completely out of control.

I also want to say that we can’t overstate the enormity of this disaster and the destruction it brought and the fact that so many people died and are still missing. Many of the deceased have not yet been identified, and many residents are living in temporary shelters because their homes are gone. Officials estimate that over 2,000 structures were damaged or destroyed. It’s going to be a very long road to rebuild. And emergency responders are still working day and night to fight the ongoing fires in remote areas of the island.

Many factors appear to have contributed to the catastrophic scale of this fire. The extremely high winds pushing flames through dry vegetation rapidly escalated the fire’s spread and prevented successful firefighting efforts. Evacuation routes were blocked by police due to downed trees and power lines, which resulted in bottlenecks and gridlock on the few roads in and out of Lahaina. Power outages and damaged cell towers exacerbated communication problems and created further confusion. We do not know why emergency sirens were not activated to warn residents or what role the electric grid may have played in sparking the fire that ultimately destroyed Lahaina.

In terms of government response, the Acting Governor declared a state of emergency the day the fire started and two days later Governor Green requested a disaster declaration, which was immediately granted by the Biden Administration. Within 48 hours, FEMA was on the ground in Maui, assembling crews for search and rescue and survivor assistance.

Several official investigations are underway to get to the bottom of this disaster. Hawaii’s Attorney General has commissioned the Fire Safety Research Institute to conduct a thorough examination of the causes. It is expected to make multiple interim reports before issuing a final report and recommendations around August of next year. Those on the ground with the most information and experience are the appropriate authorities to examine the causes of the fire. I

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look forward to hearing from our witnesses, but I'm concerned that this hearing is shifting attention and resources away from ongoing relief efforts on Maui and the official investigations that are still in their early stages.

Congress should focus on ensuring that the federal government can continue providing relief to the people of Maui. That means funding the government and funding FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund, which the President has asked us to do. That is something specific that we, and only we, can and should do without delay. A reckless government shutdown, which we know is imminent, would slow Maui's ability to rebuild and recover.

After all, this disaster is not over. Thousands of people are displaced and in desperate need of permanent housing. Firefighters are still working, and utility crews are working to restore power and repair damaged infrastructure.

So, I'm hopeful that the investigations will provide answers so that we can learn from this tragedy to ensure this does not happen again. Right now, we must do all that we can to support the residents of Maui recover and rebuild, and a shutdown is not the answer, obviously. I mean it's hard for us here in the midst of this potential shutdown to be talking about how much we can do because we don't know if government is going to be able to do anything. If by tomorrow night or Saturday, the government shuts down, that's certainly not easy for us to say to you that we're going to help when we don't even know if the government is going to be open. So, I guess my main thing, and I know it sounds political, but I can't help it because if the government shuts down, it's a serious question about what we're actually going to do.

In any case, we appreciate everybody being here and we're determined to do whatever we can to help.

Thank you.