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TESTIMONY OF RICHARD T. BISSEN, JR., MAYOR, COUNTY OF MAUI
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM,
U.S. HOUSE,
ON ASSESSING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE 2023
MAUI WILDFIRES

September 4, 2024

Aloha mai kākou. Chairman Sessions and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

OVERVIEW

While this hearing focuses on response efforts in Lahaina, we also faced multiple fires in Kula, Olinda, and Pūlehu.

We continue to mourn the tragic loss of 102 of our loved ones, and the two still unaccounted for.

In one night, 12,000 of our people were displaced, 2,200 homes and commercial buildings were destroyed, and numerous historical sites were lost leaving debris scattered over more than five square miles.

Despite this devastating loss, we moved forward acutely focused on restoring homes, schools, community centers, businesses, and natural habitat.

Families remain in temporary housing and face mounting costs from mortgage payments that will be owed once forbearance expires. Survivors struggle with financial instability, childcare and healthcare needs, and increasing mental health concerns. Our businesses and industries have endured severe economic loss.

FEDERAL PARTNERS

We are sincerely appreciative of the work of our federal partners. It is my hope that our testimony today will encourage continued support for Maui, and ensure that survivors of the next inevitable disaster will benefit from our experience.

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY (FEMA)

I am grateful for the response and leadership of FEMA Region 9 for their consistent and continued presence throughout this disaster.

Most notable, is how FEMA has adapted to our unique cultural and island community needs, including the effective use of cultural monitors and the flexibility to respond to emerging concerns.

Due to our isolated location, the unique nature of our housing market, and our high percentage of renters, finding adequate housing near work, schools, and community posed a distinct challenge.

Consequently, survivors dealt with the uncertainty and challenge of moving multiple times while in non-congregate housing, endured a burdensome process of complicated applications, and experienced confusion navigating FEMA eligibility requirements – all while suffering through post-disaster trauma.

Although FEMA is designed to offer temporary housing solutions for survivors, many of these options were impractical for an island community already grappling with a severe housing crisis.

Additionally, FEMA's rental assistance program posed unintended consequences negatively impacting our rental housing market island-wide, causing further distress for other Maui residents who were displaced unintentionally.

Permanent housing options earlier in the response would have been ideal. Expanding FEMA's Permanent Housing Construction Program to states outside the continental U.S. could provide a viable approach to addressing long-term housing solutions. Also, integrating HUD earlier into the recovery process would expedite permanent housing options.

SMALL BUSINESS ASSOCIATION (SBA)

I also want to recognize the SBA for the approval of \$396 million in low-interest disaster loans, which provided financial assistance to help Maui

begin to rebuild. However, the perception that SBA funds are intended solely for businesses rather than individuals suggests that clearer messaging could help reduce misconceptions and delays in accessing critical funds.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA)

Next, I want to acknowledge the support of the EPA, which led our unique hazardous household waste disposal operations, including the collection and disposal of lithium ion batteries from electric vehicles and solar panels.

Also, EPA's Water Emergency Team worked with county departments to expedite the restoration of our water systems and offered free inspections to help residents adhere to cesspool compliance issues.

UNITED STATES ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS (USACE)

Lastly, I would like to thank USACE for their crucial and expedited role in debris removal for residential and commercial properties, and restoring infrastructure so our residents can begin to rebuild. I also applaud their remarkable achievement in constructing King Kamehameha III Elementary School's temporary campus in just 95 days, creating a learning environment for 350 students.

CONCLUSION

Continued financial and programmatic support from our State and Federal partners is crucial to the preservation and livelihood of our people, and the success of this recovery.

A special mahalo to our Hawai'i Congressional Delegation; Governor Green, Lt. Governor Luke and our state partners, our County workforce – including the 76 who lost their own homes, and our local community partners for their unwavering support through this most difficult time.

Most importantly, I want to recognize the incredible strength of our people, many who have endured inconceivable suffering, but continue to push forward with incredible grit, sacrifice, and immeasurable courage.

And while we can rebuild structures, if we don't return Lahaina to the people who represent the spirit and soul of that community – if we don't recognize the faces of our friends and family as we repopulate, we will have lost this battle for our people – and even one more family lost is one too many.

Mahalo.