

On August 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> a series of fires broke out on the island of Maui and the island of Hawaii, including one that devastated the town of Lahaina on the west coast of Maui.

While the Hawaiian Electric Company and the County of Maui dispute some facts surrounding these events, one thing is certain, this series of fires were catastrophic to the state of Hawaii, and we must make every effort to be vigilant and try and prevent a similar disaster from striking again.

Tragically, the Lahaina fire took at least 97 lives, burned thousands of acres, caused billions of dollars in damage, and destroyed multiple native Hawaiian cultural and historical landmarks.

I am deeply saddened to hear the stories of those who survived, awaiting news of their loved ones who still remain unaccounted for, searching for housing, and wrestling with how they will survive after the fire consumed businesses and erased the island's tourism industry.

While many continue to debate which exact decisions and circumstances contributed to the catastrophic scale of the Maui fires, it is not too early to start examining what can be done better.

For example, some wildfire experts have noted that dense, flammable non-native grasses have multiplied across the island in recent years, facilitating the deadly spread of the recent fires.

Other reports have cited utility law experts, who maintain that Hawaiian Electric waited too long to pursue important upgrades to harden and modernize the electric grid against wildfire risks.

Still others have argued that Maui Electric Company, a subsidiary of Hawaiian Electric, was particularly slow in replacing outdated and deteriorating poles supporting its power lines.

There were many decision-makers involved along the way, and there is still much to sort out.

To that end, Chair Rodgers, Chair Duncan, and I probed some of these concerns in our August 30, 2023, letter to each of our invited witnesses, requesting additional information on their efforts to address wildfire risks on Maui. We thank our witnesses for their responses to our request and I look forward to discussing the responses further today.

Now, I'd like to take a moment to introduce each of our witnesses for our first panel.

We are joined today by Ms. Sheelee Kimura, President and Chief Executive Officer at Hawaiian Electric Company. Hawaiian Electric's subsidiary corporation, Maui Electric Company, provides service on Maui. Hawaiian Electric and its subordinate corporations provide service for 95% of Hawaii's residents.

Finally, we will also hear from Mr. Mark Glick, Chief Energy Officer of the Hawai'i State Energy Office. This office develops and supports state energy policy goals.

We also welcome Leodoloff R. Asuncion, Jr., Chairman of the Hawaii Public Utilities Commission. Mr. Asuncion has served as a commissioner since April 2019 and as its Chair since July 2022. The Commission, among other things, regulates the electricity rates and power service parameters of public utility companies operating in the state.

Immediately after, we will convene a second panel, consisting of testimony from our colleagues from the Hawaiian congressional delegation.

Representative Ed Case, from Hawaii's First District will testify. We will also hear testimony from Representative Jill Tokuda, whose Second District of Hawaii includes the island of Maui.

There are several investigations underway and still a lot of debate and speculation around the days in which the fires spread, and about what has been done or not done in the years prior.



However, Congress has a responsibility to pursue a safe national energy policy which includes hardened electric infrastructure that is prepared for events like wildfires and hurricanes. Congress has a portion of that responsibility along with state regulators and private sector partners. Accordingly, it is extremely important that we convene today to begin to ask the hard questions.

Given this Committee's role in protecting our electric utility infrastructure, and its general jurisdiction over power utilities, we will focus today on that aspect of this disaster.

I hope that what we learn here today will inform efforts at the federal, state, local, and utility level to protect constituents and ratepayers and reduce the chances of preventable losses of life and property to wildfires.

I thank the witnesses for participating in our efforts to learn from this horrible event and to prevent similar disasters from unfolding in such a deadly and destructive manner.