

Opening Statement
Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Sept. 28, 2023 Hearing, “Investigating the Role of Electric
Infrastructure in the Catastrophic Maui Fire.”

FIRES OF AUGUST 8, 2023

Thank you, Chair Griffith, for holding this important hearing.

Our task today is a difficult one, but also a critical one. Unfortunately, we are here today to examine the tragic events that unfolded on the Hawaiian island of Maui last month. On August 8, a series of fires broke out on the island, including one that destroyed the town of Lahaina.

Our hearts go out to the people of Maui as they face the daunting task of rebuilding their communities, mourn the loss of loved ones, and grapple with the painful memories of that terrifying day. The pain of seeing your home and that of your neighbors destroyed within a matter of hours or even minutes is unimaginable.

Ninety-seven lives were lost to this disaster. According to an estimate from the University of Hawaii’s Pacific Disaster Center, at least 2,200 buildings were destroyed, with about 86% of those buildings being residential.

ASKING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

We must do everything we can to minimize the chance that such a destructive and deadly disaster will occur again, on Maui or anywhere in our country.

And unfortunately, if we fail to learn from this event, it very well could. The Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization reports that

each year, the percentage of total land burned by wildfire in Hawaii is equal to or greater than that of any other state in the United States. Additionally, according to wildfires experts from the University of Hawaii, the annual area burned across all four counties in Hawaii has increased by 300% within the past several decades.

Eastern Washingtonians are no strangers to the disastrous consequences of wildfires, either. Last month, the Gray and Oregon Road Fires destroyed hundreds of homes, forced evacuations, and have been linked to two deaths. Hundreds are still recovering from and coping with the impacts of these wildfires.

While it is difficult to revisit the disaster than occurred on Maui, we must examine any factors that could have exacerbated the destruction, identify any unnecessary hazards that were allowed to persist, and pinpoint any additional precautions that could have been taken.

PRIORITIZING A SAFE, MODERN GRID

I understand there are conflicting views on the facts surrounding the fires, but that Hawaiian Electric acknowledged that its fallen power lines caused a fire on the morning of August 8.

Part of our job here in Congress is to ensure that every American has access to affordable and reliable energy, and that responsibility includes making sure that that energy comes from safe, well-maintained infrastructure.

There has been a lot of emphasis on some of the competing priorities when it comes to modernizing our electric grid in recent years. However, we must make sure that safety remains a top priority. A grid that is not prepared for extreme weather and not

adequately maintained is not only unreliable but an unacceptable safety hazard that could potentially cost billions of dollars and endanger lives.

PREPARING FOR DISASTER

While we cannot prevent and control for every hazard, such as the high winds that struck Maui leading up to the fire, we must prepare for high-risk fire weather, address dangerous conditions such as vegetation overgrowth, and adopt appropriate precautions for extreme weather.

I appreciate all of our witnesses traveling across the country to be here with us today. I know you have a difficult road ahead of you in rebuilding after this tragic event.

I hope that today, we can learn how Congress can be a strong partner for utilities and state agencies in addressing grid safety concerns. While I know there are other investigations ongoing, I hope this hearing provides some clarity on how and why this disaster unfolded in such a catastrophic manner and what steps we can take to minimize the likelihood of it occurring again.