



STATE OF HAWAII  
DEPARTMENT OF HAWAIIAN HOME LANDS

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD FROM  
WILLIAM J. AILA, JR, CHAIRMAN  
HAWAIIAN HOMES COMMISSION

May 5, 2021

*On April 21, 2021, Chairman William J. Aila, Jr. of the Hawaiian Homes Commission testified before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources' Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States at an oversight hearing on "Infrastructure in Indigenous Communities: Priorities for the American Jobs Plan." After the hearing, Chair Teresa Leger Fernández submitted questions for the record by Members of the Committee. This document provides Chairman Aila's answers.*

**Questions from Rep. Leger Fernández**

1. *Many Members of our Subcommittee are aware that Indigenous peoples, including Native Hawaiians, remain on the front lines of climate change. Consequently, your testimony explains the need for Native Hawaiians to be included in the creation of policies that address climate change.*
  - a. *To highlight this issue further, can you elaborate on how climate change uniquely affects Native Hawaiians? (asks about catastrophic weather events)*

**Answer:**

Native Hawaiians are very resilient and have adapted over time to coastal hazards such as high waves, subsidence and tsunami, and extreme weather events such as hurricanes and flooding during their close to 2,000 year-long history in the Hawaiian archipelago. However, the rapid pace of climate change and sea level rise impacts, including accelerated beach loss, rising groundwater levels and increasing heavy rain events, serves to undermine the foundation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge that was based on observations of phenomena, patterns and signs validated over a comparatively ecologically stable time period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nature-based Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Change in Hawai'i, A Climate Ready Hawai'i Working Paper (March 22, 2021), <https://climate.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CRHI-Working-Paper-V5.pdf>

One of the more severe impacts to Native Hawaiians is the prospect of displacement from traditional coastal lands and cultural and natural resources used for subsistence, and sea level rise impacts to burial grounds. For indigenous peoples with strong ties to coastal resources who have, since contact with Europeans been, and still continue to be, displaced from the shoreline, this is climate-related trauma compounded onto historic trauma. There is also the indignity and irony of indigenous communities with relatively small carbon footprints bearing disproportionate impacts caused by the unsustainable lifestyles of more affluent settler societies.<sup>2</sup> The impacts are truly existential, and much more immediate and traumatic, for indigenous peoples. Beneficiaries of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, many of whom waited decades to receive a homestead lease, are especially challenged by the idea of having to relocate farther away from the shoreline.

Examples of climate change impacts that cause particular hardship to Native Hawaiians and DHHL Homestead communities are as follows:

- Increasing frequency and intensity of flooding events: The Island of Kaua‘i has experienced several extremely heavy rain events in recent years, particularly in the north in Hanalei and Anahola, and in the west in Hanapēpē and Kekaha. Heavy rains and flooding have disrupted the cultivation of the staple crop, kalo (taro) and traditional salt making (pa‘akai) practices.<sup>34</sup> Siltation of reefs impacts subsistence fishing and gleaning. On O‘ahu, the homestead community of Waimanalo is also experiencing increasing flooding due to heavy rain events.<sup>5</sup> On Kaua‘i, O‘ahu and Molokai, flooding, landslides and shoreline erosion regularly damage coastal highways, which are often the only access route, interrupting daily life and interfering with access to important cultural and natural resources.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Climate Change and Social Equity Guidance Document of the City and County of Honolulu Climate Change Commission (Dec. 2020), [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3885654a153a6ef84e6c9c/t/5feb95d232da5052ae2fb8da/1609274837864/Climate\\_Change\\_Social\\_Equity\\_Guidance\\_Document\\_FINAL.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3885654a153a6ef84e6c9c/t/5feb95d232da5052ae2fb8da/1609274837864/Climate_Change_Social_Equity_Guidance_Document_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Farmers on Kauai Recuperate from April 2018 Flooding (June 18, 2019), <https://www.hawaiimagazine.com/farmers-on-kauai-recuperate-from-april-2018-flooding/>

<sup>4</sup> Traditional Hawaiian Salt Makers Combat Climate Change (July 17, 2017), <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/traditional-hawaiian-salt-makers-combat-climate-change#stream/0>

<sup>5</sup> Waimanalo cleans up after floods (April 14, 2018), <https://www.kitv.com/story/37958824/waimanalo-cleans-up-after-floods>

<sup>6</sup> West Kauai Community Vulnerability Assessment (June 2020), <https://seagrant.soest.hawaii.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WKCVA-Final-Report-June-2020.pdf>

- Increasing drought and wildfire risk: Many of the original tracts of land identified in the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1920 are located on the drier, leeward sides of the islands, far from sources of surface water, making them more vulnerable to drought impacts and wildfire. Wildfire risk has increased exponentially in natural and working lands in Kahikinui on Maui, Waimea, Hanapēpē and Kekaha on Kaua'i, Molokai's uplands and other homestead and pastoral areas. Drought in the last few years triggered the Governor to issue an Emergency Proclamation for Maui County and caused homesteaders on Molokai to cull their herds. Lack of fodder caused the death of some cattle and massive deaths of axis deer on the island.
- Sea level rise and extreme high tides are causing impacts to traditional fishponds such as an increasing need for maintenance of fishpond walls and gates, on multiple islands. Lo'i kalo (taro patches) and mala (gardens) in low lying coastal areas, which are frequently spring-fed, are experiencing increasing salinity levels at high tides, necessitating replanting with more salt-tolerant varieties.

2. *How has climate change created challenges for the homestead leasing program?*

**Answer:**

Hawaiian Homestead communities along the shoreline are some of the last stretches of coastal settlement still occupied by indigenous peoples. On islands such as Molokai, homesteads were built on filled wetlands prior to Statehood, and in areas with numerous springs and water tables very close to the surface of the land. The topography is also such that the coastal plain is narrow, flash flooding in the gulches is a common occurrence, and these communities are subject to flooding both from the sea and from the mountains. When the tide is high, and with increasing sea levels in the future, flooding will become an even more regular occurrence, as the water will have no place to go.

DHHL will need to amend all of its Island Plans to account for these impacts and will need to prioritize investments in new and relocated infrastructure at higher elevations should the need occur to relocate lessees whose lots begin to experience chronic, rather than episodic, flooding. In addition, the failure of cesspools and outdated septic systems will necessitate investment in creative solutions for wastewater management. Funding sources such as flood mitigation grants from FEMA can require matching funds from DHHL, which will have to be budgeted for. Increased funding for community resilience and hazard mitigation planning will be needed in order to vet alternatives with DHHL beneficiaries prior to implementation.

**Question from Rep. Case**

1. *Do you see a difference in terms of the advancement of Native Hawaiians on Hawaiian Homelands who do have the broadband and those who don't?*

**Answer:**

Yes, the lack of access to not only reliable broadband, but in some locations more than one broadband provider, has resulted in impacts to the advancement of Native Hawaiians on Hawaiian Homelands. The COVID-19 pandemic has unfortunately exacerbated and highlighted these inequities, as the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands has received reports of students unable to complete their online lessons due to unreliable connections and students struggling to keep up with their classmates because without internet they must complete lessons in the form of paper packets with limited instruction. We are aware of Native Hawaiians on Hawaiian Homelands who are educators and who have struggled to complete their lessons due to unreliable or unavailable internet, which has jeopardized not only their advancement as professionals but also their students' educations. These impacts were amplified outside of the educational sector as many Native Hawaiians were thrust into the reality of teleworking without adequate connections and equipment. Most concerning are the many Native Hawaiian families who were forced to rely on their limited connections and still struggled to attend critical medical appointments and maintain connectivity for life-dependent medical devices. The reliable and equitable access to broadband is critical to ensuring that Native Hawaiian families, especially those Native Hawaiians living in rural areas, are not left behind.