

September 2025 PMKCA Newsletter
There's smoke, but where's the fire?
Judging risk to our homes and families
when the only evidence is the smell of smoke.

Ruth Bennett, PMKCA President
Denning Powell, CERT Team Lead

(Note: This is Part 1 of a 2-part September Newsletter, coming as two emails.)

Given this summer's drought conditions and strong trade winds, residents on the Hamakua Coast often wonder whether we are seriously at risk from a wildfire. Often, all we have to go on is a whiff of burning vegetation. The smell can come and go as the wind changes. Until the Fire Department can assess the risk and direction of spread, we are all on edge.

Without timely and accurate information, a person miles away from the fire who sees and smells heavy smoke can believe that the fire is on their doorstep. Another person a short distance from the fire but who sees and smells no smoke may think they are unaffected even though a change in wind direction could ruin their day.

Our recent "Slaughterhouse Fire" in makai Pa'auilo

On Thursday August 7 in the early afternoon, a brush fire developed on the makai side of Highway 19 below Mile Markers 37 and 38. After burning approximately 150 acres in several hours, the fire was contained by the Hawaii Fire Department supported by our Paauilo Volunteer Fire Company 8A and other volunteer firefighters.



Fire burns on the edge of the nursery of native and rare plants grown on the farm owned by Cynthia Waymegwance and son KiTeya.

The fire flared up again on Friday August 8 and became more widespread but was also contained after several hours. For a few of those hours traffic was diverted off the highway between Mile Markers 36 and 39 and onto mauka roads through our community. Several farms in the fire's path on the makai side were severely damaged by flames and by firefighting activities (damage to fences, waterlines and roads). A GoFundMe campaign has been started to help these farms recover <https://gofund.me/64e3eb62>).

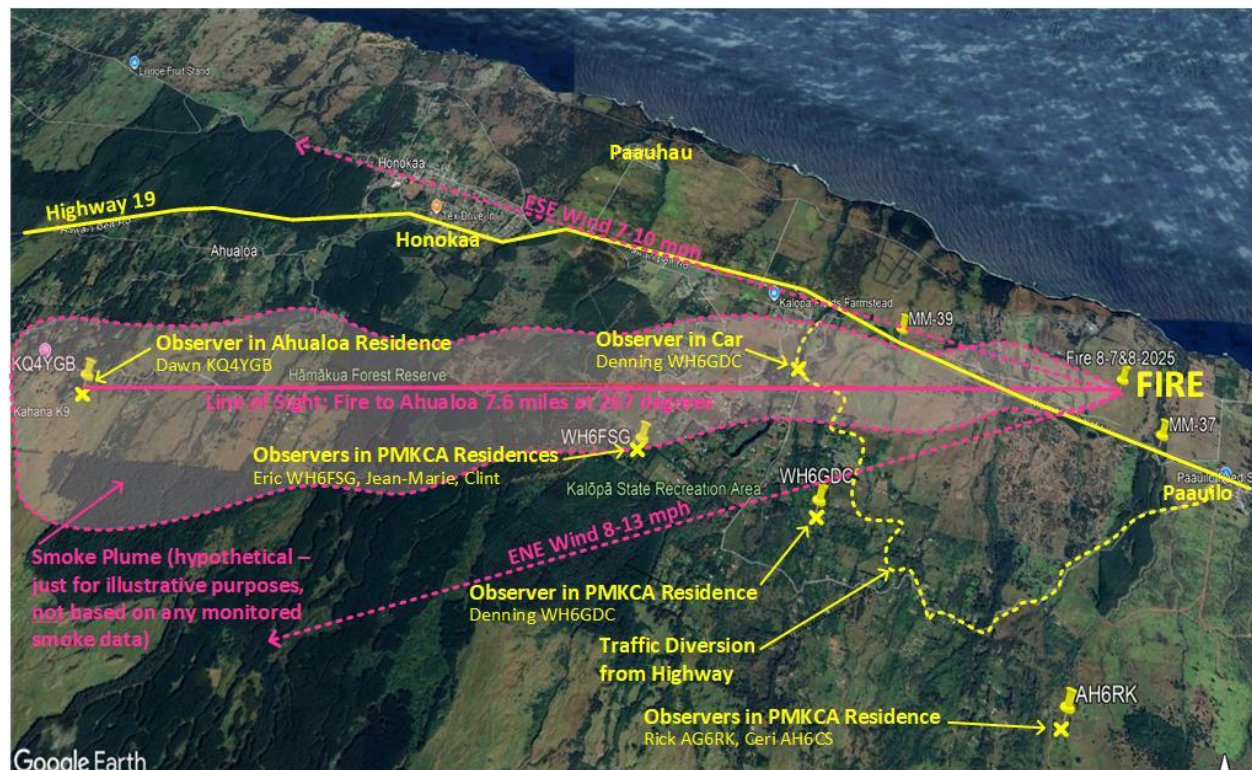
Other recent fires started in dry grass along roadways have elevated our concerns about wildfire preparedness, awareness of fire-prone conditions, and quick, accurate communication.

One Observer's Experience with the Wildfire

Denning Powell, a retired meteorologist/engineer and local CERT leader living above the fire in mauka Pa'auilo kindly drew a sketch illustrating the situation. He relates his personal experience and observations *below*. They show the complexity of what we need to deal with.

On Thursday midafternoon, on my way home from Honokaa, I thought maybe I smelled a smoky odor at the top of Apelahama Road, but a few hundred yards further up along Kaapahu Road, it was gone. At my house, halfway up Kula Kahiko Road, no odor. Then a half-hour later Dawn Smith – a new CERT member (and ham operator KQ4YGB) in Ahualoa about five miles west of me – called to report that dense smoke was enveloping her house, and it looked like it was coming from my direction.

That was the first I knew anything about a fire. I walked around my house sniffing; got no smoke odor at all. But looking toward the water saw the normal white puffy cumulus clouds were turned dark gray, so okay, that's definitely smoke.



Path of the fire and wind-driven smoke, and the positions of observers and reporters in the mauka communities.

About that time, I started getting PMKCA email bulletins from Ruth Bennett mapping the fire location and status based on the app Watch Duty (www.watchduty.org) and on fire helicopter flight paths from the app FlightAware (www.flightaware.com). She reported the fire burned 150 acres of grassland but was contained just after 5 PM.

On Friday mid-afternoon, again on my way home, I didn't smell any smoke on any road but did see a general light haze in the air. On both Apelahama Road and Kaapahu Road there were a lot of cars heading past me because of the highway detour between mile markers 36 and 39. That was my first inkling of a second fire. But still no smoke odor at my house, just a light haze in the air above. Unknown to me at the time, the fire had reignited makai of the

highway and damage to farms was occurring. Reports had come to Ruth and she had already put out a bulletin about the new fire before I reached home. That second fire, while smaller than the first, still damaged agricultural areas below the highway.

On both days, ham operators in our area monitored police and fire channels and our local ham radio emergency net. Other residents provided eyewitness and other factual reports to Ruth as she served as a hub for communications to our members and residents.

My take on the two fires is that the process created just a few weeks before for quick and accurate assessment of a local wildfire (Ruth and Eric's work) was surprisingly successful, even in its rough form. Information was collected and passed along rapidly to more than 170 people, most of whom were within possible paths for the fire.

Bottom Line

Based on Denning's talk-story above, it seems like PMKCA is off to a good start in notifying residents of wildfire risks and had learned some lessons in the process. But Denning's sketch and story illustrate the complexity of communications during situations that involve so many **human, technological and environmental variables**. Spreading more awareness throughout our community seems like a good next step. We'll be working on it. Some initial thoughts collected from several of the parties involved are offered below.

After submitting our September newsletter article to the Hamakua Times by their August 15 deadline, both Denning and I (Ruth) came up with more thoughts which we are including in the emailed version of this newsletter. The article that you are reading now is essentially the version that will be published in the Hamakua Times, but with the addition of more thoughts collected from several parties involved in emergency preparedness.

Here are those additional thoughts:

- We can't do anything about **environmental variables**. Droughts are cyclical, and this one will be over when it's over. Wind directions and speeds will be whatever the trade wind regime at the time dictates. But what we can do is pay special attention for hints of fire or smoke on days when it's really hot and dry and windy and blowing uphill. That's called situational awareness, and the more people who have it, the better the chance of a fire being detected early so 911 can be called.
- On **technological variables**, there are many existing and evolving fire apps (for your mobile phone) that probably many of us are not using or not even aware of. The County has had a Hazard Impact Map on its website for several years now. The cell phone app Watch Duty mentioned above seems especially useful; it's pretty recent. Now, it seems technologically likely that in a few years or decades AI will be able to poll home weather

stations to put together a windfield model, then look at satellite evaluations of vegetation dryness, and put those together to tell us exactly when a fire will appear on our doorstep. But in the meantime, we should figure out what tools we actually have, and use them effectively. We'll start making a list.

- Communication is only as effective as the technology it relies on. Burned cell towers or phone lines make a joke of any PMKCA Bulletin ready to be sent out. Flexibility is key to “getting the word out.” But some of us have Starlink internet, so potential pathways exist. We need to map this out a bit.
- On **human variables**, it gets complicated. Based on this first test to “get the word out quickly”, a cohesive PMKCA communication process for wildfires (and other emergencies) does seem workable. Our current process probably needs a bit more formalization to be effective, though. Backups for Ruth and Eric are essential; if they're not around, that's a single-point-of-failure condition. Ham operators monitoring fire radio channels and residents reporting local conditions all provide valuable information and can serve as alternate pathways if normal communications are down. We need to solicit and organize enough volunteers so that there are sufficient numbers of people committed to provide situational awareness of different fires in different PMKCA neighborhoods.
- We also need to know who our most vulnerable residents may be. In a previous fire, an elderly resident living alone faced the threat with only her neighbors to help her. Thankfully, that fire was contained, but we need to improve our knowledge of community vulnerabilities.

We welcome your thoughts and feedback on wildfires. We especially appreciate volunteers to help out, in whatever capacity you feel you can.

Please let us know of your interest by replying to this email.

An introduction to “Part 2 – Situational Awareness & Neighborhood Clusters”:

In addition to our work on wildfires, PMKCA is also involved in a related project, run by the CERT team, led by Denning, that fits into this broader context. What do we do if all normal communications in our neighborhoods – landlines, cell towers – get wiped out in a big storm? Or for that matter, a big fire? He kindly offered to write down his thoughts on that, in Part 2 of our September Newsletter, coming soon to your email inbox.

~~~~~ COMING UP! ~~~~~

*The DATE and PLACE have been set for...*

**PMKCA's First(?) Big Rummage Sale,  
Bake Sale, and More!**

**Saturday October 25, 2025, 8am to 1pm**

**At the Pa'auilo Hongwanji**

44-1477 Hauola Rd. (Old Town Pa'auilo)

*Reply to any email about the Rummage Sale  
to reserve a table or volunteer to help.*

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Pa'auilo Mauka Kalōpā Community Association

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