



June 2023 Newsletter



The fire burning behind the Pa'auilo Transfer Station on Wednesday night, May 3. Credit: Leilani Martin, posted on Senator Tim Richards' Facebook page.

The Recent Pa'auilo Fire

**An urgent case for better
emergency notification.**

Ruth Bennett
PMKCA VP

On May 3, a windy Wednesday afternoon, residents above Pa'auilo town learned about a wildfire in their neighborhood. Notification arrived by word of mouth, by the smell of smoke and by a rain of ash falling onto residents' homes. Clearly, as strong northeast winds were blowing upslope into the heart of our community, once again somewhere nearby a wildfire was burning.

This article tells the story of the fire, as we currently understand it, and examines the issue of notifications to affected communities in a fast-developing emergency. The absence of timely and accurate information from reliable sources to residents became a disturbing factor in the way many residents of Pa'auilo and Kalōpā experienced the May 3 wildfire.

I first learned of the fire at around 3pm that day from a neighbor who was hurrying back to his home in mauka Pa'auilo from Waimea. He had heard about the fire from his wife, a nurse. The hospital, through its official sources, had learned that the fire was burning along Pohakea Rd, above Pa'auilo town. My friend's home and livestock were directly in the fire's path. He was hurrying back to collect his animals and protect his home.

Another fire? It was news to me! The fire was not visible from my home, and no smoke or ash was falling in my area. I had received no alerts from county agencies (Civil Defense, Fire Department, Police Department) but, quite obviously, areas of our community were at risk.

Most of us have vivid memories of the fast-moving June 2021 fire which burned most of 1400 acres in less than 12 hours, threatening Pa'auilo town and the homes and ranches above the town. We were immediately concerned about this new windblown fire which seemed to be following a similar path.

I write newsletters and bulletins for Pa'auilo Mauka Kalōpā Community Association. Since we had not received any official notifications to our community, I began collecting information about the fire and its impact from other residents.

I was contacted by ham radio operators in our area who were passing on a brief report from the Honoka'a Fire Department. "Fire near the reservoir, heading mauka, engines on scene." I started calling around. Residents were reporting the fire through 911 and searching for reliable information. Yes, a fire was active, burning in mauka Pa'auilo and fire equipment was deployed along Pohakea Rd.



Helicopter view of the fire on Wednesday afternoon. Credit: Fire Chief Todd's office, posted on Senator Richards' Facebook page.

Reports were coming in that the fire had burned through the strips of planted eucalyptus left when logging was completed about 8 years ago. The fire touched along Pohakea road in places but primarily was burning west across logged areas, setting ablaze the piles of slash left behind by the logging operation and creating new hotspots hundreds of yards in advance of the primary fire. Flames were visible from residences along Ka'apahu Rd. which cuts diagonally through the heart of the community, directly in the fire's path.

We learned eventually that the fire started in the vicinity of the Pa'auilo transfer station, where power lines to our mauka residences go

up through the remaining strips of eucalyptus forest and into the logged areas and slash piles. To this date of publication, we don't have any official word as to the cause of the fire.

Loss of electricity during the fire. Many residents living along the seven county roads above and in the path of the fire suddenly lost electricity that afternoon and didn't regain power until around noon the following day, nearly 24 hours later.

One of our residents, dependent on electricity for household power and internet communication, with a failing cell phone, and with no way to find out why, had to leave home and find an internet site to complete her work. Others, especially residents who were dependent on electricity for medical support, were at much greater risk.

The loss of power disrupted the lives of more residents than were affected by the fire – and for far longer. Again, there were no notices issued to the community by HELCO, and no information appeared on their website. Days after the fire, we heard that HELCO had intentionally cut the power to our

community after the fire started, for safety concerns. (My household is one of the 15% of Pa'auilo residences that are off-grid – I didn't learn of the plight of my neighbors on HELCO until darkness fell and I heard their generators running!)

Information filtered to us through the smoke, often relayed by residents driving by the fire lines, from ham radio operators sharing information, or occasionally from fire department contacts. As the fire progressed, I passed information to our email list subscribers in a series of four email bulletins.

Somewhere around 8:30pm Wednesday evening, we learned from unofficial sources that the fire was considered "contained." It would be monitored overnight and was not expected to threaten our communities.

A lack notifications during the fire. On Thursday morning, the Mayor's office released a statement about the fire, the first official announcement we had seen from any authority that provided any information directed to the public. We got the statement by our own inquiry to County Council member Heather Kimball's office. However, the announcement reported that "no structures or infrastructure are threatened" – clearly at odds with the power infrastructure outage that many of our residents had experienced.

In replying to the Mayor's office, Joe Clarkson, PMKCA president, put our experience with the fire this way: "To me, this whole episode reveals a horrific lack of timely communication. Our community members see and smell the smoke of an uncontrolled fire. Shortly thereafter the power goes out and night falls with no indication from any agency as to what is happening or whether there is any danger. Our county government agencies should do better."

I learned days later that State Senator Tim Richards was reporting on the fire in real time, providing information from authorities like the Fire Department. But only subscribers to his Facebook page were being informed. (Search for Senator Tim Richards Facebook to see the posts). Many Pa'auilo residents didn't get the message.

If you sense some frustration in this article, you're not imagining it. Why were we, on the edge of an uncontrolled wildfire, and without electricity, searching the internet and calling authorities to find out whether we were in danger?

Residents from our communities asked that question of our county representative Kimball. She recommended that we present our concerns to the County Council in a budget-related meeting on May 16. Several members of the PMKCA board and another knowledgeable resident of Pa'auilo gave our testimony about the fire and the risks that were made worse by the lack of information. We asked the Council to provide funds for comprehensive, timely, and accurate notifications to communities that were experiencing rapidly moving emergencies such as wildfires. Our testimonies seemed well-received, and we are hopeful that the council will respond.

What did we learn from this fire? There are many lessons from this recent fire event. We can keep up with our neighbors and be aware of the ways in which we might mutually support each other in an emergency. We can join and support the local volunteer emergency teams like CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) and local ham radio operators (Hāmākua Emergency Net). Most importantly, we can protect our homes and properties by maintaining our own defensive boundaries, and by being prepared for an evacuation, if necessary.

But without timely notifications coming from reliable sources, and directed to affected communities, we cannot effectively protect ourselves. Under the best of circumstances, it takes time to move livestock, to start generators, to help our more vulnerable neighbors, to prepare for evacuation. It isn't acceptable to hear from authorities, as we were told, "We will either give you an 'all-clear' or an 'evacuate' message, nothing else."

Here's what gets to me: At 3am on Friday morning, while firefighters were continuing to put out the Pa'auilo fire, I was awakened by a phone call bulletin from Hawaii County Civil Defense. The recorded message told me that a DIFFERENT fire was burning in an isolated area of the North Kohala district, and that the Akoni Pule highway would be closed. That 3am call was the first fire-related bulletin I had received from Civil Defense, or from any agency, during our fire experience – *and it didn't apply to our community's still-active fire*. I hope you might see the irony in that.

Speaking for PMKCA and, if I may, for the residents of our rural communities, we are frustrated. The county can, and should, do better, by giving communities coordinated, timely and accurate information in a fast-moving, potentially life-threatening, emergency like our recent Pa'auilo wildfire.

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## ***Upcoming PMKCA Meetings & Events***

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Board of Directors Meeting

Thursday, July 13, 2023 - 6PM

Location: To be determined.

If you have any interests or concerns, we encourage you to email any Board member and to attend the Board meeting.

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***Mark your calendars!***

### ***ANNUAL JULY PICNIC MEETING***

Saturday, July 29, 2023 - 11am

Kalōpā Park Main Pavilion

Our annual potluck picnic meeting will once again be held in Kalōpā park in late July. Interesting speakers, great food, a chance to see friends and a prize-laden bingo game to end the afternoon.

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Join PMKCA or Renew your Membership for 2023

PMKCA dues are only \$20 per calendar year and help support so many great community activities. Click the "Visit our website" link below and choose Membership/Dues. We offer a PayPal option, or mail a check made out to PMKCA, PO Box 408, Pa'auilo, HI 96776.

[Visit our Website](#)

