



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association
Photo courtesy of Karl Backus

Monthly News & Updates

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September 2021 Newsletter



Pa'auilo June Fire Update

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Wildfire Safety and Preparedness

**By Joe Clarkson,
PMKCA President**

Note: Much of the information presented here was recently written up by Lopaka O'Conner of Councilmember Heather Kimball's office prior to his leaving for graduate school. My sincere thanks to him and Heather Kimball for letting me include his work.



Smoke rises from the bulldozed fire breaks along Pohakea Rd. the day after the

Pa'auilo Fire Community Meeting

The past few weeks have been a devastating time for our communities in North Hawai'i as wildfires have forced mass evacuations, destroyed homes, and burned through thousands of acres of land. In light of these events, Heather Kimball facilitated a community meeting on August 12th (originally to be held at the Pa'auilo Hongwanji but moved online due to Covid).

In attendance was Chief Kazuo Todd of the Hawai'i Fire Department, as well as representatives from Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization (HWMO), Hawaiian Electric, and Kamehameha Schools.

For those interested, the full recording of the meeting is available on the District 1 YouTube channel (go to YouTube and search "District 1, County of Hawaii"; it should be near the top of the search results).

Kimball is in ongoing conversations with HFD, the Department of Water Supply, and Kamehameha Schools about how we can improve fire safety infrastructure, including dip tanks, reservoirs, and the use of private cane haul roads as evacuation routes.

Wildfire Safety and Preparedness

At the meeting, Elizabeth Pickett of HWMO described actions that homeowners can take *today* to protect themselves, their property, and their wider community from fires. Keeping the area near your home clear of dead vegetation, low-hanging tree limbs (called "ladder fuels"), and tall grasses is a must. Trim trees to keep branches a minimum of 10 feet away from your home. Move woodpiles or other flammable materials at least 30 feet away from your dwelling. And be sure to create a 5-foot-wide fire-free area around your house by using non-flammable landscaping materials or high-moisture, drought-resistant vegetation.

A key step in emergency preparedness is planning. HWMO recommends that families follow the "**ready-set-go**" method.

- Get "ready" by developing an action plan for your family which includes locating multiple evacuation routes, identifying an emergency meeting point, gathering an emergency supply kit, and maintaining a list of emergency contacts.
- Be "set" by maintaining situational awareness so you can begin the evacuation process as soon as a fire starts; alert your neighbors, secure your house, and evacuate ASAP.
- And when it's time to "go," GO! By leaving early, you maximize the chances of surviving a wildfire and you don't get in the way of firefighters responding to the situation.

Most people are not aware of the fact that Hawai'i is one of the most fire-prone states in the country. Even here in rainy Hamakua, a few weeks of dry weather allowed guinea grass to dry out enough to burn easily during the Pa'auilo fire even though it was still mostly green. HWMO urges everyone to take the possibility of wildfires seriously, no matter their location.

On their website, HWMO has resources which give greater detail on all these preparedness and emergency response steps. Visit them at hawaiiwildfire.org.

Pa'auilo Fire Questions

Chief Todd was asked several questions about the Pa'auilo fire. He noted that there is still no finding of a cause for the fire and that is very possible that we may never find out what started it. The fire moved so quickly that even though the first responders from Honoka'a arrived only 18 minutes after the fire was reported, it was difficult to contain.

Containment and suppression required the hiring of five bulldozers and one helicopter in addition to the mobilization of numerous county and volunteer fire fighting teams.

Total cost for the fire to county taxpayers has not been finalized, but Chief Todd estimated that expenditures for additional fire suppression support from private contractors added over \$200,000 to the bill.

Todd also reminded everyone that livestock often provide protection from grass fires by keeping grass short through grazing. When animals can't be evacuated ahead of a fire, the best place for them is a pasture that has recently been grazed down. The Pa'auilo fire was stopped in numerous places when it encountered well grazed pasture. Animals should also be given access to ponds and other water sources if possible because they will go into the water to avoid flames. We are lucky here that most grasses are palatable to livestock. In West Hawai'i, fountain grass creates a tremendous fire hazard with no ranching benefit at all.

Tree Plantations

The possible fire danger of tree plantations was discussed by numerous participants. Marissa Harmon of Kamehameha Schools (KS) described several projects her organization is pursuing to mitigate the danger of fire. One program is the introduction of grazing under the eucalyptus trees planted by KS lessees. Even though the trees in the planted forests have high water content, few lower limbs and are generally moderately resistant to fire, keeping the fuel load from under-story grasses low will add safety.

Harmon also described efforts to lease fallow land to ranchers for grazing purposes. One of the difficulties to doing so is the high cost of the fencing needed prior to the introduction of cattle or other species.

One participant asked about the danger from trees near power lines. Hawaiian Electric representatives noted that tree trimming is a constant effort they take to keep vegetation away from electrical conductors. The most common effect of vegetation contacting power lines is a power outage, not a fire, but no one wants outages either. Typically, about a third of power outages are caused by vegetation but so far in 2021 almost 60% of them have been from that cause.

Hawaiian Electric representatives also clarified that private landowners are responsible for keeping trees on their land from contacting power lines and may be billed for the cost of removal if they fail to deal with an obviously dangerous tree.

Marissa Harmon commented that Kamehameha Schools will no longer allow lessees to replant trees near power lines after existing trees are harvested.

Community Emergency Planning

Francine Roby of the Ahualoa Neighborhood Watch also described her efforts to organize emergency planning for her community (and others). The upsurge in COVID-19 cases has forced her to reconfigure her planning course into an online format, but Heather Kimball's office will share more information when Roby's program goes live. She's planning to bring communities together to create all-hazard community emergency plans, which will be a fantastic contribution to our safety and preparedness.

Kimball reminded viewers that, as always, if you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to contact her office at 961-8828 or by emailing heather.kimball@hawaiiicounty.gov.

PMKCA also has information about emergency preparedness on its website at <https://www.pmkca.org/emergency-preparedness.html>

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## PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting Thursday, October 14, 2021, 7PM

The meeting will likely be held via a ZOOM conference. If you have any interests or concerns and would like to attend, we encourage you to email any Board member for details on joining the online meeting.

### ***Renew your membership in PMKCA for 2021!***

*Mahalo to many of you who have renewed your membership for 2021!  
If you think your membership might have expired, contact Ruth Bennett at  
[rbennett22@earthlink.net](mailto:rbennett22@earthlink.net) for a review.*

You can find payment options, including an easy PayPal link, on our website,  
[www.PMKCA.org](http://www.PMKCA.org). Under "Home", click on "Membership/Dues".

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