

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 22, 2023

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

We first want to thank the U.S. Department of the Interior (the Department) for its swift response and continued support in the aftermath of the wildfires that resulted in the loss of life and destruction of communities in Hawai‘i. We greatly appreciate the Department’s direct support in firefighting efforts that protected the Pu‘ukoholā Heiau National Historic Site on Hawai‘i Island and the Department’s critical role in fire evacuation and search and rescue efforts in Maui.

As we transition from the immediate wildfire response to long-term action, we request that the Department provide support for environmental recovery and cultural preservation efforts on Maui and Hawai‘i Island.

Environmental Stewardship

These tragic wildfires continue a pattern of frequent once-in-a-lifetime weather events that are negatively impacting every aspect of life in Hawai‘i. Climate-fueled environmental conditions, including prolonged drought, dangerously high winds, and invasive species, contributed to these wildfires, which have tragically resulted in over 100 confirmed deaths. In addition to more than 2,100 structures damaged and 5,600 residents displaced, thousands of acres of agricultural and conservation land have been burned.

Land management also remains an important factor in the mitigation of increased natural disasters. The Native Hawaiian Community recognizes the interconnectedness of ecosystems with the traditional ahupua‘a subdivision of land, from the mountains to the sea. The increase of fallow agricultural lands, lack of support for conservation lands, and difficulty in accessing critical resources, such as water, exacerbate the community impacts of climate disasters.

As Federal agencies look to assist the people of Hawai‘i in efforts to restore the local ecosystems, we request the Department offer its technical expertise in the consideration of the future resilience of these communities as well as respect the traditional stewardship of these areas. The Department will play a vital role in coordinating and overseeing the federal response to help in the rebuilding of these communities.

Repatriation of Native Hawaiian Artifacts

The recent wildfires that swept through Lāhainā, Maui have left many residents, including members of the Native Hawaiian Community, mourning not only the loss of family and friends but also destruction of homes, historic landmarks, and cultural items.

For hundreds of years, Lāhainā was the center of religious and political activity in Hawai‘i. In 1810, after King Kamehameha succeeded in unifying the Hawaiian Islands, he made Lāhainā his royal residence. For three decades, Lāhainā served as the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom before it was moved to Honolulu. As one of the most significant archaeological sites in Hawai‘i, Lāhainā was also home to historic documents such as the Mahele (the great land division agreement of the 1840s), the Hawaiian government’s first constitution, and the remains of several Hawaiian monarchs.

Over the past 30 years, in Hawai‘i, repatriation advocates have helped bring back feather cloaks, wooden statues, and more than 6,000 ancestral bones, an effort which has been critical to restoring Native Hawaiian cultural assets, preserving history, and perpetuating traditional indigenous practices. As part of ongoing efforts to rebuild the town of Lāhainā and revitalize its rich history, we ask that the Department work with local leaders and community members to support the repatriation and transfer of any human remains and other cultural items of significance to the Native Hawaiian Community.

We also ask that the Department take an active role to ensure that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other Federal agencies involved in Lāhainā remediation efforts are in compliance with requirements under the Native American Graves, Patrimony, and Repatriation Act.

Native Hawaiian Climate Resilience

The wildfires on Maui have renewed centuries-old tensions over water rights and management of natural resources between community members and developers. In the late 18th century, Lāhainā was once abundant with natural wetlands, extensive taro patches, and fishponds that sustained wildlife and generations of Native Hawaiian families. However, after more than a century and a half of plantation agriculture driven by American and European colonists, many Lāhainā streams have been depleted, and the large-scale monoculture of sugar cane and pineapple industries has drastically altered the ecology of the island.

Over the past two decades, Native Hawaiian farmers in Maui have fought to reclaim water rights and restore streamflow on their ancestral lands for taro farming, sustainable fishing, and other traditional agricultural practices. We ask the Department’s Office of Native Hawaiian Relations help build capacity in the Native Hawaiian Community to increase climate resilience on Maui, Hawai‘i Island, and throughout the State of Hawai‘i by considering these efforts to revive sustainable indigenous agricultural practices when determining Native Hawaiian Climate Resilience and Adaption grant awards authorized under the Inflation Reduction Act.

Native Hawaiian Consultation

During his recent visit to Lāhainā, President Biden assured community members in Maui that the Administration would “do everything possible to help [them] recover, rebuild, and respect culture and traditions when the rebuilding takes place.” He also promised the Lāhainā community that the federal government would support cleanup and rebuilding efforts and “get it done the way [they] want it done.”


It is critical that the federal government follow the President’s directive to elevate and advance the needs of affected communities – not the interests of predatory developers. The devastating wildfires present the Native Hawaiian Community with an opportunity to rebuild their homelands and manage their resources in ways they have not been afforded in the past. They are best equipped to navigate their own future, and we must do all that we can to protect their seat at the decision-making table.

In October 2022, the Department’s Office of Native Hawaiian Relations announced its plans to develop the agency’s first-ever consultation policy with the Native Hawaiian Community. We encourage the Department to continue working to develop and finalize these formal consultation procedures with the Native Hawaiian Community so that they can be utilized by Federal agencies charged with remediation efforts on Maui and Hawai‘i Island to ensure the full participation of the Native Hawaiian Community in long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts.

While communities in Maui and Hawai‘i Island continue to recover and start to rebuild, it is crucial that state and local governments and residents have access to strong resources and necessary assistance. The historical, cultural, and ecological importance of these islands and the affected areas cannot be overstated. We stand ready to assist the Administration in the environmental response and cultural preservation efforts of Maui and Hawai‘i Island.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee



Ed Case
Member of Congress



Jill Tokuda
Member of Congress