

# A State Official Refused To Release Water For West Maui Fires

The fight over water is nothing new on Maui. But the impact on the county's ability to battle fires is coming clear.

100

By Stewart Yerton / August 15, 2023  
Reading time: 4 minutes.



With wildfires ravaging West Maui on Aug. 8, a state water official delayed the release of water that landowners wanted to help protect their property from fires. The water standoff played out over much of the day and the water didn't come until too late.

The dispute involved the Department of Land and Natural Resources' water resource management division and [West Maui Land Co.](#), which manages agricultural and residential subdivisions in West Maui as well as [Launiupoko Irrigation Co.](#), [Launiupoko Water Co.](#), [Olowalu Water Co.](#) and [Ha'iku Town Water Association.](#)

DLNR delayed releasing water requested by West Maui Land Co. to help prevent the spread of fire, sources familiar with the situation said.



Burned stores reveal the ferocity of the Aug. 8 fire that stormed through Lahaina leaving little to nothing left at every place it touched. (David Croxford/Civil Beat/2023)

Specifically, according to accounts of four people with knowledge of the situation, [M. Kaleo Manuel](#), a Native Hawaiian cultural practitioner and DLNR's deputy director for water resource management, initially balked at West Maui Land Co.'s requests for additional water to help prevent the fire from spreading to properties managed by the company.

According to the sources, Manuel wanted West Maui Land to get permission from a taro, or kalo, farm located downstream from the company's property. Manuel eventually released water but not until after the fire had spread. It was not clear on Monday how much damage the fire did in the interim or whether homes were damaged.

Manuel declined to be interviewed for this story. DLNR's communications office said in an email that it was supporting the state's emergency communications response and "unable to facilitate your inquiry at this time."

Glenn Tremble, an executive with West Maui Land Co. said to have knowledge of the dispute, did not return a request for comment.

However, Gov. Josh Green spoke candidly Monday during a press briefing about conflicts over water on Maui – although not the DLNR-West Maui Land Co. incident directly – and encouraged news media to explore the issue. The conflicts are rooted in the diversion of water by large plantations, which starved downstream users from a resource essential for Native Hawaiian agriculture, particularly the [traditional practice of growing taro or kalo](#).

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But the governor said conflicts over water are being reshaped in an age of climate change and wildfires. Now the conflict includes opponents who do not want water to be used to fight fires, the governor said.



The diversion of water for sugar plantations at the expense of traditional Native Hawaiian kalo farming has been at the root of conflicts over water on Maui and elsewhere. (Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2023)

“One thing that people need to understand especially those from far away is that there’s been a great deal of water conflict on Maui for many years,” Green said. “It’s important that we’re honest about this. People have been fighting against the release of water to fight fires. I’ll leave that to you to explore.”

“We have a difficult time on Maui and other rural areas getting enough water for houses, for our people, for any response,” Green added. “But it’s important we start being honest. There are currently people still fighting in our state giving us water access to fight and prepare for fires even as more storms arise.”

Green said the state is in the midst of a “comprehensive review” by Attorney General Anne Lopez of decisions made before and during the firefighting efforts.

“There will be multiple reviews at every level,” he said.

In 2022, two Maui senators, [Gil Keith-Agaran](#) and [Lynne DeCoite](#), introduced [a measure](#) to push DLNR to allow fresh water to be used to fight fires and pointed to West Maui as being particularly vulnerable.

The bill noted that “in 2019, West Maui suffered from an active fire season in which wildfires scorched twenty-five thousand acres of land.” It would have required DLNR to “cooperate with the counties and reservoir owners to develop protocols and agreements for the use of reservoir waters for fire safety purposes.”

Specifically, the measure said, “The protocols and agreements shall address the emergency use of reservoir waters for prevention, control, and extinguishment of fires while taking into account the various competing uses of reservoir waters.”

The bill died without a hearing.

*Civil Beat reporter Thomas Heaton contributed to this report.*

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### About the Author

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— **Makaala** 5 months ago

My heart goes out to all of our people in Maui who are impacted by this tragedy. We too were impacted by a large fire on our Moku at the same time. I find it very interesting that Moku O Hawai'i was fighting large brush fires in Kawaihae and then in Ka'u.

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How are these fires getting started across the State all at the same time or very close to it. What is going on???? Is it nature or some crazy person lighting these fires??

Thank god and our firefighters and Volunteer firefighters for giving 100% to get the fires under control and extinguished.

God Bless your all

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