



Big Island Polls

Poll results: Readers say more than one solution to best prevent wildfires on Big Island

By [Nathan Christophel](#)

August 20, 2023 · 2:30 AM HST

A commenter on Big Island Now's most recent poll — which asked what readers think is the best way to prevent wildfires on the island — said the answer is never as simple as one right answer.

He's correct. Especially this week.



Just a portion of the devastation in Lāhainā on Aug. 12. (Tiffany DeMasters/Big Island Now)

Nearly two weeks ago, wildfires — some still not 100% contained — swept across Maui leaving a path of destruction and death in their wake. The Lāhainā Fire has been described as the deadliest wildfire in the past century in the United States. The climbing death toll is now at 114.

Brush fires also [scorched about 1,500 acres](#) in North and South Kohala last week. Fortunately, there was no loss of life or injuries and only minimal property damage reported in those blazes.

In light of the tragedy on Maui and the recent brush fires on the Big Island, Hawai'i County Mayor Mitch Roth and Hawai'i Fire Department Chief Kazuo Todd last week [urged the community](#) to be fire aware and prepared. Fire safety is a collective responsibility — everyone has a kuleana (responsibility) to take measures to mitigate the risks of wildfires to their residences and neighborhoods.

“The recent events weigh heavy on our hearts and serve as poignant reminders of the profound impact that wildfires can have on our communities,” Roth said. “We have seen how quickly the fires devastated Maui and truly believe that a unified community effort can yield meaningful results in safeguarding homes, families and our ‘āina.”

That means it's all hands on deck and all solutions are valid when it comes to preventing wildfires. It's not just one answer.

However, readers who voted in last week's poll thought some solutions might have larger impacts.

The top pick was creating fuel breaks near more communities, which got 220 of the total 954 votes in the poll, or 23%. A fuel break is a strip of land specifically changed from one type of vegetation to another to bolster the ability of firefighters to safely control a blaze burning around it.

With help from the Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization, the Big Island has several fuel breaks protecting communities, including in Puakō and Waikōloa, and upslope endangered dryland.

Coming in at No. 2 was reducing/controlling invasive species that increase the risk of wildfires. That choice received 177 votes, or 18%. When invasive species outcompete native plants, they contribute to the escalation of wildfires. Especially when they are dried out by drought, providing more fuel for fires.

Reader Bett Bidleman shared that there is invasive cane grass growing on three sides of her home and said more laws need to be passed by the Hawai'i Legislature to require removal of these invasive grasses, including hefty fines and time limits for removal. She also thinks anyone whose home or business is threatened by brush fires should be able to file a complaint to force prompt removal of invasive grasses if the owner of neighboring land fails to remove them.

"Removal does not mean using harmful pesticides," Bidleman said, "but bulldozing, mowing and replacing with native plants where feasible. And continued maintenance."



Brush fire at Lalamilo Farm Lots in Waimea on Aug. 8. (Photo courtesy of Hawai'i state Sen. Tim Richards)

Rounding out the top five results in last weeks poll were doing more prescribed burning with 129 votes, or 13%; enhancing response capabilities with 125 votes, also 13%; and creating more fuel reduction programs was fifth with 104 votes, or 10%.

Here are the full results:

- Creating fuel breaks near more communities: 220 (23%).
- Reducing/controlling invasive species that increase risk: 177 (18%).
- Doing more prescribed burning: 129 (13%).
- Enhancing response capabilities: 125 (13%).
- Creating more fuel reduction programs: 104 (10%).
- Providing assistance to homeowners, businesses and others to identify and reduce fuels: 62 (6%).
- Conducting more risk and prevention education campaigns: 57 (5%).
- Increasing opportunities for collaboration to implement mitigation projects: 40 (4%).
- Implementing a fire danger rating system: 21 (2%).

- Providing better wildfire mapping technology: 19 (1%).

Total votes: 954.

Janene Lasswell offered her own top 6 solutions in a comment on last week's poll:

1. Map fire management zones the same way lava zones are mapped.
2. County fire department oversees fuel reduction. County removes hazardous growth to within 100 feet of high density areas if landowners refuse. Liens placed on property.
3. Hawaiian Electric institutes power outages during red flag alerts in high fire zones.
Yes, critical power needs will need alternate power sources.
4. Require all new construction permits to incorporate fire-resistant materials and methods. All new subdivision permits to include 100 feet of maintained green space or bare mineral earth boundaries in high fire danger zones.
5. Satellite communications equipment for first responders and county and state agencies involved.
6. Civil Defense needs an upgrade.

"All good points," another reader commented in reply, adding that power poles should be made to easily withstand hurricane-force winds. While they weren't from a hurricane, the winds that fanned the Maui wildfire flames blustered up to 80 mph.

"Fifty years ago, third-world Vietnam was using concrete power poles. I think Hawai'i should too," the reader said.

Nathan Christophel

Nathan Christophel is a full-time reporter with Pacific Media Group. He has more than 25 years of experience in journalism as a reporter, copy editor and page designer. He previously worked at the Hawaii Tribune-Herald in Hilo. Nathan can be reached at nathan@bigislandnow.com

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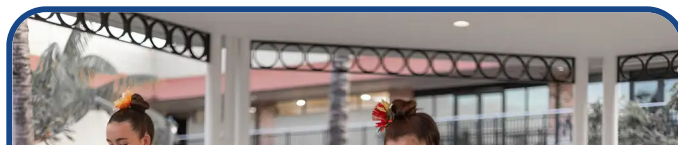
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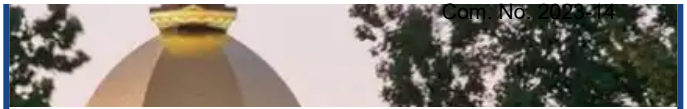


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