

**ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT COMMISSION
COUNTY OF HAWAII**

MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, June 25, 2025

9:03 a.m. to 11:58 a.m.

Hilo Council Chambers, Hilo, and Zoom

A video recording is made part of these minutes, which is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5F68UFGbioo&list=PLtluYxDZK7NLxoEY70SEmb9VwgUetmTzf&index=1>

Timestamps are provided for reference in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 92, Hawai'i Revised Statutes.

***Disclaimer:** These meeting minutes were generated with assistance from AI and are intended to provide a summary of discussions. While efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, they may not capture the full context or details of the meeting. Readers are encouraged to reference official recording for clarification if needed.*

County staff present:

Craig Kawaguchi, Deputy Director; Mike Rivera, SWD Chief; Kelly Hartman, DEM Planner; Christy Swafford, Information and Education Specialist; and Sinclair Salas-Ferguson, Deputy Corporation Counsel.

Others present:

Claudia Rhor, Kristine Kubat, Barbara Bell, Karen Anderson, Nick Doyle and others.

I. CALL TO ORDER [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 0:00 – 0:36]

Chair Perez called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m., noting that quorum was present.

Present

- Jim Beets (District 1) In-person
- Dell Otsuka (District 3) In-person
- Erica Perez (District 4) In-person
- Dorothy Norris (District 8) Zoom
- John Kometani (District 9) In-person
- Absent
 - Gonzalo Garcia (District 7)
- Vacancies
 - District 2 seat vacant
 - District 5 seat vacant
 - District 6 seat vacant

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR May 28, 2025 [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 0:37 – 3:51]

The Environmental Management Commission will consider approval of the minutes from its meeting held on May 28, 2025.

Chair Perez opened the item and confirmed a quorum with five commissioners present. She noted that testimony from community member Sharde Freitas requesting modifications to the May 28, 2025, meeting minutes was included in the meeting packet.

Motion 1 was made and seconded to approve the minutes with the proposed modifications. Vice-Chair Norris asked whether Sharde Freitas was present and if her concerns had been fully addressed. Chair Perez clarified that the testimony had been formally submitted via email and would be included as-is.

Vice-Chair Norris expressed that she had no issues with the existing modifications but opted to abstain from voting. Following brief discussion, the motion to approve the May 28 minutes with the modifications was passed by unanimous vote.

III. PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON ITEMS ON THE AGENDA [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 04:16 -09:54]

Testimony for Agenda Item IV.2 (Mālama One)

Cory Harden [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 04:16 – 06:56] provided testimony expressing concerns about the proposed Mālama One plastics recycling facility. Harden questioned the need to import approximately 17 million pounds of plastic waste to Hawai'i Island each year and raised issues regarding potential contamination from plastic additives, labels, and residues such as pesticides and pharmaceuticals.

Harden highlighted risks associated with landfill sludge disposal, particularly the potential impact on leachate entering the Kealakehe Wastewater Plant, which is already facing difficulties in obtaining an NPDES permit. Additional concerns included the release of airborne micro- and nano-plastic particles from the facility. Harden acknowledged ongoing community efforts to reduce plastic use through refillable containers and reusable foodware, and questioned whether the project would undermine these initiatives. They concluded that the potential harms of the project outweigh its benefits.

Public Testimony – Agenda Item V.1.A (Budget)

Chuck Flaherty, [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 07:10 – 09:54] representing the Sierra Club Hawai'i Island Group, provided testimony expressing concerns about the recent Department of Environmental Management (DEM) budget process. Flaherty cited a lack of transparency and insufficient communication prior to decision-making, stating that it undermines public trust and leaves both the Environmental Management Commission and the public with unanswered questions about funding sources, project prioritization, and the broader funding strategy.

They emphasized the importance of community input and expressed concern that it is unclear how testimony and expert advice offered at EMC meetings are being integrated into DEM's projects, work plans, or written reports. Flaherty urged the EMC to collaborate with DEM to develop a process that allows for public input before budget items are finalized and approved by the Council. They also recommended that DEM provide regular updates on its community engagement efforts and work with knowledgeable community members to help identify and fund optimal environmental solutions. Flaherty concluded by thanking the commission for their time and volunteer service.

Public Testimony – Agenda Items IV.1, IV.2, and VI (Future Agenda Items)

Claudia Rhor [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 11:16 – 21:03] provided testimony on multiple agenda items. Regarding Item IV.2, she referenced the Maui Aloha ‘Āina Project, a waste-to-renewable fuel initiative currently under environmental review. Rhor highlighted the potential for that project to impact the flow of recyclable materials from other islands and suggested that Mālama One’s proponents should be aware of this development.

On Item VI, Rhor requested that the Commission include a discussion on Bill 60 at a future meeting. She expressed concern that the bill, currently before the County Council, would redefine land use for meeting facilities without requiring restrooms or sewer connections, which she believes poses public health and environmental risks to nearby communities.

Regarding Item IV.1, Rhor raised concerns about the Nani Paniau subdivision in South Kohala. She stated that the Planning Director unilaterally approved an SMA exemption for the construction of eight homes using individual wastewater systems without going through proper public review or notifying relevant agencies, including DEM. Rhor asserted that this decision bypassed the authority of the Leeward Planning Commission and circumvented established procedures for environmental oversight. She referenced SMA 326 (1991) and stated she had obtained supporting documentation via a UIPA request.

Rhor submitted written testimony that included a copy of SMA 326 and her contact information. Although her submission arrived after the deadline, Chair Perez assured her that commissioners would review it following the meeting. Rhor emphasized the urgency of protecting Puakō reefs and advocated for the establishment of a wastewater sewer system in the area.

Public Testimony – Agenda Item IV.2 (Mālama One)

David Hunt, [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 21:15 – 23:02] a resident of Honoka‘a, testified in opposition to the Mālama One project. Hunt began by asking whether his written testimony, submitted the previous day, had been received. Chair Perez confirmed it had not yet been included in the testimony packet and invited him to present his comments verbally.

Hunt expressed strong concern about the project's permitting process, stating that Mālama One may have been granted an exemption by the Department of Health—either explicitly or by omission. He cited research on similar plastic recycling facilities in the U.S. and outlined the associated risks, including micro- and nano-plastic pollution affecting air, water, and soil, as well as significant health and environmental threats from waste disposal practices.

Testimony was cut short due to a loss of audio connection.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

1. Puakō for Reefs presentation- Barbara Bell will provide a presentation on Puakō for Reefs current activities. [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 24:26 – 56:06]

Barbara Bell and Karen Anderson from the nonprofit *Puakō for Reefs* gave a presentation on the community-led wastewater project in Puakō. They provided historical context, current progress, and next steps toward establishing a wastewater solution to protect Puakō’s severely degraded reef caused by community cesspools.

- **Commission Discussion:**

- Chair Perez and Commissioners expressed enthusiasm and support for the project.
- Commissioner Norris inquired about formal commission support. The presenters welcomed a support letter or individual advocacy with council members.
- Commissioners asked about financing details, equity in cost distribution, and applicability to other regions (e.g., Keaukaha).
- Karen and Barbara noted flexibility in CFD assessments based on home size, socioeconomic status, and property type.
- The presenters acknowledged that while Puakō is further along, similar challenges and opportunities exist in other coastal and inland subdivisions across the island.

2. Mālama One presentation

Public Testimony – Agenda Item IV.2 New Business, Mālama One presentation

Public Testimony – David Hunt [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 00:57:49 – 01:02:01]

Mr. David Hunt testified in opposition to the Mālama One plastics recycling facility, voicing concern about the Department of Health potentially granting an exemption from an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project. He urged the Commission to inquire into the nature of any such exemption, including who authorized it and on what grounds.

Mr. Hunt highlighted emerging scientific findings regarding microplastics and nano-plastics, especially their presence in human tissue and associated carcinogenic risks. He described the facility's operations—importing, storing, grinding, and melting plastics—as hazardous and potentially generating substantial waste and pollution. He stated that recycling terminology and project promises should not obscure public health and environmental concerns.

He requested that the Commission conduct an independent review of any exemptions or regulatory shortcuts and stressed the importance of public input. Mr. Hunt also requested that the upcoming presenter from Mālama One address these concerns, particularly what permits or exemptions may apply to the project.

Public Testimony – Kristine Kubat [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:02:19 – 01:05:20]

Kristine Kubat expressed strong opposition to the Mālama One project, referencing her previously submitted written testimony. She acknowledged the good intentions and respectful approach of the Mālama One team but maintained that plastic recycling is not a viable solution to the plastic pollution crisis. Kubat emphasized the need to significantly reduce plastic consumption, particularly single-use containers, rather than focusing on recycling.

She urged the commission to recommend a pause on the project until the State has promulgated rules regarding micro- and nano-plastic pollution, arguing that such regulation is essential for environmental protection and future accountability. Additionally, she suggested the County could classify plastic sludge from the facility as special waste and reject it at the landfill due to potential leachate contamination affecting Kealakehe and the ocean.

Kubat concluded by thanking the commission for their volunteer service.

Public Testimony – Justin Canelas [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:05:26 – 01:08:51]

Justin Canelas spoke in opposition to the proposed Mālama One plastic recycling facility. He expressed concern about the long-term environmental and health impacts of plastics, citing scientific literature that underscores the toxicity of single-use plastics and their presence in ecosystems and human bodies. As an expectant father, Mr. Canelas shared a personal commitment to avoiding plastic products, noting the seriousness of protecting future generations. He questioned the logic of building a facility that relies on continued plastic production at a time when Hawai'i is actively pursuing legislation to reduce single-use plastics.

He described the powerful testimony shared by visiting delegations from Cancer Alley, Louisiana, highlighting the real-world consequences of plastic manufacturing, including high cancer rates and environmental devastation. Mr. Canelas urged the Commission to reject the project, arguing it is not a sustainable solution and would lock the island into a harmful cycle of dependency on plastic. He concluded by encouraging Mālama One to pursue more sustainable alternatives, such as aluminum or glass packaging, and called on the Commission to follow the guidance of ancestral wisdom in protecting the 'āina.

Public Testimony – Kona Smith [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:09:15 – 01:12:04]

Kona Smith, a youth representative from Mālama 'Āina Compostables, a zero-waste program based in Ka'ū, testified in strong opposition to the proposed plastic recycling facility. Speaking on behalf of fellow youth advocates, Smith shared their journey of learning about the harmful impacts of plastic production and recycling.

Smith stated that the proposed facility would not solve the plastic problem, but rather worsen it by continuing a cycle of pollution and environmental harm. Smith emphasized the importance of caring for the 'āina, and warned that introducing industrial plastic infrastructure would disrupt the harmony between people and land.

Citing A Poison Like No Other by Matt Simon, Smith highlighted the dangers of microplastic exposure and referenced stories from Cancer Alley, Louisiana, where children living near plastic facilities have suffered serious health impacts.

Smith urged the Commission to listen to the voices of youth and future generations, rejecting the facility in order to protect the island's land, health, and people.

Public Testimony – Roxy Casteneda [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:12:08 – 01:14:17]

Roxy Casteneda, a Youth Zero Waste Advocate with Mālama 'Āina Compostables in Ka'ū, testified in opposition to the proposed plastic recycling facility. Drawing from A Poison Like No Other by Matt Simon, she emphasized that despite good intentions, plastic recycling is not a viable solution and introduces additional environmental and health risks, particularly through toxic emissions into air and water.

Casteneda spoke to the need for systemic change, highlighting that recycling does not address the root problem—plastic production itself. She stressed the urgency of preserving Hawai'i's unique ecosystems and communities and warned that the project could lead to unintended harm.

Quoting environmental leaders and researchers, she argued that large-scale recycling has largely failed and that genuine solutions require reducing plastic use at its source. Casteneda urged the Commission

to consider the long-term impacts and choose a path that supports true sustainability for the island and its future generations.

Public Testimony – Joli Ing [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:14:59 – 01:19:16]

Joli Ing, Executive Director of the Kokua Initiative at Waiākea, expressed support for the Mālama One (pronounced "oh-nay") project. She emphasized her long-standing commitment to the community and environmental stewardship. Ing advocated for the facility as a solution to Hawai'i Island's growing plastic waste issue, stating that it offers a closed-loop, zero-discharge system that processes existing PET and PE plastics into reusable materials locally—eliminating the need to burn or export waste, and reducing airborne toxins.

She expressed concern that inaction on existing plastic pollution contributes to the microplastics problem and argued that Mālama One addresses this by providing a local, safe solution. Ing acknowledged the broader critiques of plastic recycling but distinguished this project's system from conventional plants by highlighting its contained, zero-liquid and zero-air discharge design.

Mālama One presentation- Nick Doyle will provide a presentation related to Mālama One's plastics recycling plan. [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 01:21:39 – 02:04:07]

Mr. Nick Doyle of Mālama One provided a detailed presentation on a proposed PET recycling facility planned for Kea'au, emphasizing its closed-loop, zero-liquid-discharge process designed to eliminate environmental discharge and reduce the need for imported virgin plastic.

Commission Discussion - Commissioners raised questions about:

- The nature and volume of particulate discharge.
- The definition and handling of source-separated plastics.
- Potential import of materials from other islands and associated impacts.
- Regulatory oversight, operational transparency, and data sources.
- Concerns about the lack of third-party monitoring and the absence of operational precedents in Hawai'i.
- Concerns around proof of concept in the US and the uncertain proven history of Mālama One operation expertise.
- Clarification of proprietary technologies and operational experience
- Chair Perez mentioned maintaining the position from the EMC Recommendation to Council from Feb 4, 2025, regarding plastic recycling plants in Hawaii County.

Mr. Doyle reiterated the facility is not yet operational, but the technologies proposed are commercially proven globally. He expressed willingness to return for a more detailed operations or business-specific presentation and committed to transparency with the commission.

V. REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 02:05:15 -02:39:15]

1. Director's Informational Report

Deputy Director Craig Kawaguchi reported that there were no significant updates regarding the budget at this time, as the department was still waiting for finalization before providing further details. He introduced Mike Rivera as the County's new Solid Waste Division Chief, noting it had been nearly four years since the position was last filled permanently. Commissioners welcomed Mr. Rivera and expressed appreciation for his leadership.

During the discussion, Commissioner Norris raised concerns about transparency in the budget process, referencing comments from the Sierra Club. Kawaguchi responded that DEM is working on its outreach and anticipates posting project information and updates to the department's website. Commissioner Otsuka requested a list of all budgeted projects, including personnel-related items, to allow commissioners to review and provide input. He also requested that staffing updates be included as a standing monthly agenda item, to which Chair Perez agreed. Kawaguchi shared that since January, 16 positions had been filled out of 87 vacancies, with approximately 10 additional hires in progress or pending interviews. He also encouraged commissioners to refer potential applicants for the ongoing recruitment of the Wastewater Division Chief and Deputy Chief.

Chair Perez requested that the Commission be provided with a copy of the DEM budget submitted to the County Council, emphasizing the importance of early access to enable informed input. Christy Swafford, DEM's Information and Education Specialist, shared that the department is currently developing a public-facing webpage to display wastewater project details, starting with AOC projects. This will include timelines, bid awards, and other key information, with plans to expand to other divisions. She welcomed future feedback from the Commission once the page is live.

Perez also requested an update on the Operations & Maintenance (O&M) manuals previously discussed. Kawaguchi confirmed that development is underway with a consultant, with completion expected early next year. Kelly Hartman, DEM Planner, clarified that the O&M manuals are part of the broader Integrated Wastewater Management Plan contract. She explained that the draft Integrated Plan is anticipated in fall 2025, with public review and Commission presentations to follow, and finalization projected for January 2026. Commissioners inquired about staffing levels at the Hilo Wastewater Treatment Plant. Kawaguchi estimated that 11 positions are needed at the facility but would need to confirm the current number of filled positions. Commissioner Beets noted that upcoming AOC compliance deadlines were previously mentioned and asked for status updates in advance of key dates like July 1.

Commissioner Norris commented that improving facility safety could support better recruitment by creating a healthier work environment. Kawaguchi agreed and stated that small fixes are already being addressed at the Hilo plant. Chair Perez suggested incorporating staffing targets and safety goals into the Integrated Wastewater Plan, such as setting measurable objectives for recruitment and workplace improvements. Hartman responded that the plan will include an organizational chart and reference to operations manuals, and she welcomed feedback to strengthen metrics during the public comment period.

Mike Rivera formally introduced himself to the Commission, sharing his academic background in chemistry and biology and his extensive career in solid and hazardous waste management. He acknowledged that many of the concerns raised during the meeting—including staff safety, infrastructure improvements, and employee engagement—align with his priorities and those of DEM leadership. He emphasized the importance of building a healthy work culture as a foundation for successful programs. Commissioners welcomed him and expressed appreciation for his experience and commitment.

Chair Perez again thanked everyone for their flexibility during the hybrid meeting and acknowledged that the discussion had briefly deviated from the formal agenda order. She closed the item and moved the meeting forward.

Public Testimony – Agenda Item V.1 REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE, Director’s Informational Report

Public Testimony – Alan Fukamizu [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 02:39:35- 02:41:56]

Alan Fukamizu, a County wastewater operator and chief union steward, provided testimony expressing concerns about staffing shortages and safety at the wastewater treatment facilities. He noted that Operations & Maintenance (O&M) manuals had previously been removed from facilities and only returned after complaints were made. He stated that the Hilo plant requires 11 operators but currently has only eight to cover multiple treatment plants and pump stations, three of which discharge directly into the ocean under NPDES permits.

Fukamizu emphasized that insufficient staffing creates serious safety risks, with some operators working alone across multiple sites. He urged the Department to consider hiring and training assistant operators due to the difficulty of recruiting licensed personnel. He also expressed frustration over a lack of communication between management and operators, stating that past attempts to raise concerns have been ignored. He called for increased transparency and direct engagement from leadership, including a visit from the Director to speak with staff. He concluded by stating that workers would prefer to resolve issues internally rather than escalating concerns publicly.

VI. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 02:42:25 -02:44:08]

1. Commissioners may propose future agenda items at this time or submit items for consideration on the next agenda to Chair Perez by Monday, July 7, 2025.

Commissioner Otsuka requested that Human Resources (HR) updates be included as a standing monthly agenda item. Chair Perez confirmed it will be added to the monthly report. Chair Perez requested that members of the public email her with future agenda item suggestion.

VII. ANNOUNCEMENTS [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 02:44:18 – 02:44:27]

1. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday July 30, 2025, at Community Meeting Hale (Building G).

VIII. ADJOURNMENT [SEE YOUTUBE TIMESTAMP 02:44:28 – 02:44:41]

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Otsuka and seconded by Commissioner Beets.

Vote: Motion approved unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 11:58 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Tiffany Wallace, Secretary