

Hawaiʻi Residents Fighting Wildfires Before They Happen

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MOLOKAʻI, Hawaiʻi – Seven years ago, Erin Peyton made her home on this small island known for its Hawaiian culture, its broad sandy beaches, and high cliffs.

Despite Molokaʻi's natural beauty and rural charm, Peyton understood that the dry grasses and wild foliage surrounding her townhome complex could also fuel destructive wildfires.

"We needed to take action," said Peyton, who noted that the condominiums had been built in the middle of an abandoned, unmaintained, 160-acre golf course. The condos were not close to a fire station, and response time was at least 30 minutes.

The actions she took illustrate how one individual, working with neighbors, can make a difference. Peyton set an example that many communities are following in the aftermath of the August wildfires that leveled Lahaina.

When thieves stole the hoses from Peyton's Paniolo Hale complex, she decided to act. As a former resident of fire-prone California, she was aware that simply replacing a garden hose was no solution.

In 2019, she convinced her homeowners' association to bring in the Hawaiʻi Wildfire Management Organization to do an assessment of the Paniolo Hale's wildfire vulnerability. The nonprofit organization can then suggest options such as creating wildfire fuel breaks and cutting back hazardous foliage. It provides some funding for these projects through the U.S. Forest Service and other sources.

Although the organization's assessment cost the Paniolo Hale homeowners nothing, Peyton's neighbors were skeptical at first. They feared that they would have to remove all their trees and landscaping.



But Peyton helped convince them that some measures wouldn't require drastic action like pulling up all their landscaping. She received training in ways to reduce wildfire risks and she became such an advocate that Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization named her one of its neighborhood ambassadors.

"She did all this on her own as a volunteer," noted Andrea "Nani" Barretto, co-Executive Director of the Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization.

Paniolo Hale became one of 18 communities in Hawai'i certified for the national Firewise USA program, which helps communities reduce and mitigate their fire risk.

Since the Maui wildfires last year – a grim reminder of the devastation wildfires can inflict – another 22 Hawaiian communities have applied to the Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization to join the Firewise program, Barretto said.

The Paniolo Hale complex worked on a variety of measures aimed at reducing dangerous vegetation that could fuel a fire.

For instance, in the Paniola Hale complex, vegetation has been cut back 50 feet from structures, the grass has been cut back and the trees have been mulched in place. One of the community's first priorities was to create access roads so fire trucks could get to the townhomes and, once there, work in defensible space. This is an area free of leaves, debris or other flammable materials and is up to 200 feet from a structure.

Protecting those roads is an ongoing process. The goal is to reduce the chance that a vehicle might accidentally spark a blaze in heavy roadside vegetation or that a neglected road winds up overgrown with foliage.

"This is about a four- or five-year project of dumping the mulch on these access roads to really prevent growth," Peyton said. "So, we will be watching them and maintaining them for a few years."

Fuel breaks are strips of land that are cut back or purposely converted from one vegetation type to another to help slow the spread of flames, providing an area where fires are easier to control.



While extreme conditions may still cause extreme damage, fuel breaks can also aid in firefighting efforts in more moderate circumstances.

The community also helped remove large amounts of green waste from former ranch lands that had become dumping grounds for vegetation from landscaping and gardening work, household, and construction waste.

“Over the years, we’ve gotten rid of green waste on the west end that creates a lot of fuel loads, piles from 30 to 100 feet on both lived in and abandoned structures,” Peyton said. “It’s worth the effort. You must be prepared.”

Gerald C. Johnson, who heads a FEMA Hazard Mitigation task force that advises the public about ways to reduce fire hazards, said it takes a community-wide effort to reduce fire risk.

“Not only does this maintenance help to keep a fire from potentially raging out of control,” Johnson said, “but it also buys time for human intervention to become a factor in eliminating the danger.”

For the latest information on the Maui wildfire recovery efforts, visit mauicounty.gov, mauirecovers.org, fema.gov/disaster/4724 and [Hawaii Wildfires - YouTube](#). Follow FEMA on social media: [@FEMARegion9](#) and facebook.com/fema. You may also get disaster assistance information and download applications at sba.gov/hawaii-wildfires.

