

# AFTER THE FIRE

RECOVER. REBUILD. REIMAGINE.

## Maui at Two and a Half Years

*What After the Fire USA saw - what Maui County changed - and why this recovery has rounded a bend*

*Prepared by After the Fire USA for the people of Maui, fire survivors, and those seeking to understand what a community-centered megafire recovery looks like at mid-course.*



**Date of fire**  
August 8, 2023

**Report frame**  
February to March 2026

**Core question**  
What changed systemically

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## *A Note on the April 2026 Kona Storms: April 2026*

In early April 2026, a severe Kona storm system impacted the State of Hawai‘i, with Maui among the most affected counties and a subsequent storm hit the island in mid-April.

According to preliminary data from the National Weather Service (NWS) and the State of Hawai‘i Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA), parts of Maui experienced extreme rainfall totals exceeding 10–15 inches in localized areas over a short duration, contributing to widespread flooding and infrastructure stress (NWS, 2026; HI-EMA, 2026). Statewide rainfall estimates were reported in the hundreds of billions of gallons, with early hydrological modeling suggesting totals approaching or exceeding one trillion gallons across the island chain (NOAA, 2026).

Maui experienced significant impacts, including flooding in low-lying and previously fire-impacted areas, roadway washouts and closures affecting key corridors, hundreds of homes impacted, millions of dollars in infrastructure damage, and the emergence of sinkholes that disrupted transportation and access in multiple areas. These impacts align with established research showing that post-wildfire landscapes are significantly more vulnerable to flooding due to vegetation loss, hydrophobic soils, and altered watershed dynamics (USGS, 2024; NOAA, 2023).

A [Federal Disaster Declaration](#) was approved unlocking funding and resources necessary to repair infrastructure, stabilize damaged areas, and support affected residents. The federal declaration will directly shape the pace and extent of recovery from this event as well as recovery from the 2023 Lahaina fires.

Despite these challenges, Maui County’s response to the Kona storms showed marked growth in emergency management and communications capacity. The Maui Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) responded quickly, with clear, consistent public communication before, during, and after the storm. Coordination across agencies was evident, and public messaging reached residents in a timely and actionable way.

The community response was equally notable. Maui residents mobilized quickly to support one another, reflecting the same deep social cohesion and mutual aid that emerged in the aftermath of the Maui fires. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the cumulative toll. Maui’s community has endured repeated shocks over the past two and a half years, including wildfire loss, prolonged displacement, rising costs of living, and ongoing recovery pressures. This latest disaster adds strain to a population that is already carrying a heavy burden. Wellness and mental health support must remain a top priority. Recovery is not only physical. It is emotional, cultural, and communal. As Maui continues forward, sustained investment in mental health services and community-based healing will be essential.

Maui County moved quickly to integrate the Kona storm response into its existing recovery structure under Maui Recovers. This alignment under a unified recovery framework reflects a more mature and coordinated system than was possible in the early months following the 2023 fires. The systems in place are stronger, and coordination is more effective. The community remains deeply committed to one another. However, the trajectory of recovery will depend in part on the extent of infrastructure damage and the availability of federal support.

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## Executive Summary

Two and a half years post fire, recovery in Maui is not complete, and any report that says otherwise would be inaccurate. Families are still waiting to return home. Trauma is still present. Commercial recovery is lagging behind residential construction. The pace still feels too slow for the people living it. But After the Fire USA believes Maui has rounded a meaningful bend and that difference is not superficial. Rather, it is structural.

In the first months after the 2023 Lahaina and Kula Fires, After the USA documented a community facing overlapping failures: emergency warnings that did not perform as expected, a pre-existing trust gap with government, a lack of housing that existed pre-fire, immediate fears of displacement and predatory buying, and water systems and service understood by many residents not just as infrastructure, but as a justice issue tied to history, land, and sovereignty. Maui could not simply rebuild back into those same conditions and call that a successful recovery.

What we observe now is a county, and a broader recovery ecosystem, that have moved from shock to intentional and thoughtful processes. Maui commissioned after-action review work and publicly acknowledged warning system failures; expanded emergency management capacity; improved evacuation routes; established visible transparency tools and services; enacted controversial housing policy policies; accelerated affordable housing delivery and has begun to restore water stewardship thereby gaining public trust. These actions are not minor; they are deliberate choices that change the direction of a recovery.

Equally important, we saw partnerships and coordination in 2026 that did not exist a year earlier. Unlikely public and private partners are working together, including government, philanthropy, land stewards, advocacy groups, and community leaders who are increasingly collaborating to address issues. This collaboration is key because a community cannot recover from megafire through construction of structures alone. A successful recovery depends on the simultaneous development and improvement of both hard and soft infrastructure, and these new partnerships are paving the path for a positive recovery process.

For the people of Maui, the central standard remains clear: get 'ohana home, protect culture, restore water and land, and build a future that does not repeat the old extractive pattern. The koa tree is an apt metaphor. It can bend with the wind, but it is deeply rooted and strong. Maui has bent. Maui is not broken. The work ahead is still enormous, but the foundation being laid down will be able to support a solid and improved structure.

***Maui still faces major unresolved burdens, but the county and community have begun to turn legitimate grief, anger, and distrust into realistic systems change, visible progress, and a stronger community-defined, government supported recovery path.***

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## I. Context and Timeline

The Maui fires of August 8, 2023 were not just a bad fire day. They were failure of systems colliding with extreme winds, brittle infrastructure, constrained evacuation geography, and a community already living inside a severe housing shortage. Lahaina’s destruction was catastrophic, but the implications extended islandwide. Kula, too, entered a long recovery, though on a different scale and in a different landscape.

After the Fire USA was mindful in how our organization coordinated with Maui to support their recovery. Our first visit to the island was rooted in our philosophy of how we show up after megafire: respectfully, by invitation, and only when we can add value rather than take space. From that first delegation in December 2023 through return visits in 2024, 2025 and February 2026, our role has been to listen, connect, compare, and document what survivors and local leaders said they needed most.

As many communities impacted by disasters have witnessed, the immediate attention and resources provided by external sources diminish over time. Public perception, both from residents and circulated widely by the press, depicted conflicting realities. This was true in Maui as well as after the January 2025 Los Angeles Fires. Those fires, ironically, provided Maui the opportunity to provide support and guidance to Southern California.

### ATF and Maui Timeline

Period	Recovery stage	ATF Role	Observations
Aug to Nov 2023	Shock, emergency response, displacement	Watched from network	Too early for input on recovery other than providing solidarity
Dec 2023	4 months post-fire	Delegation #1	Trust gap, sirens, housing pressure, investor pressure, water inequity, and community voice emerged clearly
Feb 2024	6 months post-fire	Delegation #2	Focus on mental health and collaboration between public and community-based organizations
Apr 2024	8 months post-fire	Delegation #3	ATF encouraged additional transparency tools, dashboard information, and long-range recovery planning discipline
May 2024 to Feb 2026	From response toward readiness	Return delegations and summit loop	Visible shift from emergency improvisation toward structural response, housing delivery, and policy change
March 2026	2.5 years post fire	This report	The question is no longer only “what went wrong,” but “what changed, what still hurts, and what can others learn”

## II. Initial Conditions: What Broke, What Was Feared, and Why It Mattered

### A. Systems failure and the trust gap

After the Fire USA’s earliest Maui observations documented more than operational failures. Our observations documented a legitimacy problem. Residents were trying to understand why sirens had not sounded, why evacuation timelines were unclear, and why the public narrative felt incomplete. That mistrust did not begin with the fires; the fires highlighted it.

This matters because megafire recovery is not only about rebuilding structures. It is also about rebuilding whether people believe institutions are telling the truth, showing their work, and centering those most harmed. A community will not follow a sail plan if it believes the navigator is hiding the map.

### B. Housing, displacement, and exploitation risk

Maui entered this disaster with one of the worst housing crises in the country. After the 2023 fires, that crisis became acute. After the Fire USA has documented spikes in rental costs, eviction pressure, the role of short-term rentals in constraining long-term inventory, and immediate concern that underinsured families would be pushed toward distressed sales.

Lahaina Strong’s *Fishing for Housing* protests captured the community’s early demands with unusual clarity: convert more units into long-term rentals, strengthen renter protections, slow displacement, and build a counterweight to the market forces that punish survivors first. Grassroots organizations like Maui Hale Match brought much-needed attention to the growing population of unhoused residents and fire survivors slipping through the safety nets provided by government.



*Kaanapali Beach – December 2023*

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### C. Water as infrastructure and justice

Water presented in Maui not as a side issue of recovery, but as a central one. Early concerns included damaged and contaminated infrastructure, hydrant failure and pressure loss during the fires, and a deeper argument that water control in Maui was inseparable from long-running conflicts over land, diversion, and ownership.

After the Fire USA's initial feedback was blunt and is still relevant: if water governance is broken before disaster, megafire will brutally expose that rupture. This aligns with broader research showing that water infrastructure failure is a critical compounding factor in wildfire disasters, particularly when systems are already strained or inequitable (USGS, 2024; EPA, 2023).

### D. Transparency gap

By spring 2024, one specific issue became apparent. The county had closed the burn scar and residents were not able to enter Lahaina to grieve, heal or see progress. Restricting access was understandable, but it created fertile ground for rumors, confusion, and mistrust. ATF USA recommended that the county develop a public-facing recovery dashboard as had been suggested by the city of Santa Rosa early on in the recovery. That recommendation was less about technology than about dignity and transparency. People deserve to see what is being done in their name.



## III. What Changed in Two and a Half Years

The strongest way to assess Maui at the two-and-a-half-year mark post-fire is through a path of: 1) concerns then, 2) action since, 3) evidence now, and 4) remaining risk. This structure resists both sentimentality and cynicism. It lets the record speak.

### A. Emergency management, warnings, and evacuation readiness

The before picture needed improvement and could have been more prepared, as is witnessed in almost every major disaster. Existing emergency sirens were not activated and other warning systems were not used. Communications had failed and evacuation timelines remained contested. Maui County could have responded defensively. Instead, the county pursued after-action review work and later published preparedness reforms that directly named warning and public information shortcomings.

By 2026, the shift is visible in both staffing and infrastructure. The Maui Emergency Management Agency is under new leadership and has been funded with additional resources. Mayor Bissen has supported new evacuation and situational-awareness tools that have been implemented alongside specific roadway projects meant to improve egress, including the Luakini Street Extension, Aki Street connector, and Kuhua Street Extension. The point is not that the island is now fixed. It is that the county moved from arguing over failure to implementing and establishing systems meant to reduce the chance of repeated failure.

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The April 2026 Kona storms functioned as a real-time stress test of these improvements. The most important question was not only storm severity, but whether warning systems performed, coordination held, and communication reached residents effectively.

Research on disaster response consistently shows that communities that conduct after-action reviews and implement redundant alert systems see measurable improvements in subsequent disaster response (FEMA, 2025; GAO, 2024).

Early evidence suggests that during the 2026 Kona Storm, Maui's systems operated with greater clarity, redundancy, and timeliness than during the 2023 fires. This performance reinforces a central finding of this report: Maui has moved from system failure toward system functionality, even under renewed hazard conditions.

### **B. Communications and connecting with the community**

The 2023 fires exposed multiple issues with the island's communication procedures and systems. A 2021 risk assessment had identified that a failure in communications was possible, however the emergency management system had yet to be properly improved and enhanced. Maui is equipped with audible all-hazard outdoor warning sirens intended to notify the public during emergencies, and while the system is tested every month, it is generally associated with warnings for tsunamis. The sirens were not used to warn the community about the fires because of the concern that people would think there was a tsunami and head up the country toward the path of the fires.

Post fire, as is frequently observed after disasters, there was confusion, anger and lack of verified factual information being disseminated throughout the community. Maui County addressed the deficiencies and gaps head on by establishing open and transparent information that allowed residents to gain valuable factual information as well as share their concerns and needs. Weekly in person community meetings continue to this day and have become a reliable source of emergent information for recovery.



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### C. Housing delivery, housing protection, and the fight to keep people home

Housing is where Maui’s recovery is most measurable and most emotionally loaded. In 2024, the county was still describing policy reviews, legal strategies, and emergency workarounds. By 2026, the narrative has changed. Housing was publicly framed as the county’s top priority under the banner “Keeping Our People Home.” [House Maui](#) was presented as a community-driven framework aligning public, private, and nonprofit sectors around local housing delivery.



*Kilo hana Makai Housing*

That shift matters because policy alone does not house people. Maui needed delivered units, not just speeches. The evidence now includes completed and in-progress affordable housing projects including the rebuilt 80-unit Kaiāulu o Kupuohi, the 120-unit Kaiāulu o Nāpili, expanded developments in West Maui, projects moving in South and Central Maui, and county support for county-owned land strategies. The county also moved on politically difficult systems change, especially [Bill 9](#), which the Mayor framed as a return to balance between visitor economy pressures and local housing survival.

After the Fire USA’s own field validation in February 2026 was concrete. We toured [Kaiāulu o Kūku’ia](#), a 200-unit affordable housing community for working families at 30 to 60 percent of area median income, with fire survivor prioritization built into placement. The design itself told a recovery story: gathering spaces, room for family connection, retail integrated into daily life, and a preschool tied to language and cultural continuity. This is not just shelter. It is stabilization.

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*Temporary housing units adjacent to the Housing for Healthcare Initiative*

### **Housing for Healthcare Initiative**

A unique-to-Hawaii collaboration is addressing the urgent need for affordable housing, both for healthcare providers impacted by the wildfires and to recruit desperately needed health care professionals to Maui. The County donated land to Maui Health Foundation, with dozens of funders, including Kaiser Permanente and Hawaii Community Foundation, to build 16 permanent homes and 15 ‘ohana units. These units will provide 31 transitional rentals to keep Maui Health professionals local, including those rebuilding their lives after losing their homes in the 2023 wildfires, and recruit more essential healthcare providers to meet Maui’s severe health care shortages (41% physician shortfall, an unmet demand for specialty care services at 60%, and surgical shortages at 28%).

Maui’s housing crisis predates the 2023 fires and remains among the most severe in the United States. Estimates indicate a pre-fire shortage of approximately 5,000–7,000 units, with median home prices exceeding \$1 million and rental vacancy rates below 2% (Hawai‘i Housing Planning Study, 2023). These efforts all matter greatly. Without them, post-disaster research shows that communities with pre-existing housing shortages experience: slower recovery timelines, increased displacement, and higher rates of permanent out-migration (Urban Institute, 2022; HUD PD&R, 2023).

### **D. Federal Funding**

Maui County has one of the worst housing crises in the country, with high demand, low supply, and unaffordable prices for both renters and homeowners, a crisis exasperated by the 2023 fires. The Maui County CDBG-DR First-Time Homebuyer Opportunity Program, part of the Ho‘okumu Hou initiative, helps wildfire survivors and qualified residents purchase homes with up to \$600,000 in assistance to cover closing costs, down payments, and mortgage rate reductions, prioritizing wildfire survivors and those with 80% or less of the Area Median Income. So far, 9 families have closed on their home purchases and another 42 are actively shopping for their first home.

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## E. Counterweights to predatory buying and displacement

Every post-fire community says it wants to prevent displacement. Maui has gone farther by helping build structural tools that can actually do it. Early warnings from state leadership about predatory purchase offers acknowledged the danger. Later, Maui's ecosystem added stronger local counterweights, like the Hawaiian Council, the Lahaina Community Land Trust and innovative anti-displacement financing approaches and loan programs designed to interrupt forced land loss.

The Lahaina Community Land Trust is one of the clearest signs that Maui understands disaster capitalism for what it is. It was formed because real concerns about land transfers were immediate, and because too little local ownership before the fire made further loss even more dangerous. ATF USA met with the Land Trust and is now convinced that land protection is not a side project. It is a core recovery defense. If land leaves the community in the first years after disaster, so does the future.

## F. Water stewardship and public trust

Few developments in Maui are as significant as the shift in water governance language. Shortly after the fires, water was discussed by residents and highlighted by community advocates including Lahaina Strong as inequitable, historically distorted, and inseparable from fire vulnerability. By 2026, the county was openly describing negotiations to acquire key water assets and move drinking water stewardship from 23 percent public toward 93 percent public. Mayor Bissen's transparency and willingness to tackle deep-rooted inequities in water availability are yet another example of his strong leadership post-disaster.



*Waikamoi Flume, Koolau Forest Reserve*

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That is not cosmetic progress. It is governance reform. It signals that Maui is trying to move water away from a fragmented system shaped by older ownership patterns and back toward broader public stewardship. Paired with major waterline, well, treatment, and wastewater investments, this is one of the strongest reasons After the Fire USA believes Maui has rounded a bend. Water returning to public trust and water returning to land are both part of the same story.

**G. Transparency, dashboards, and visible accountability**

A recovery dashboard may sound mundane unless you have lived inside a burn scar recovery. Then it becomes obvious. Public dashboards reduce rumors. They give survivors a way to see whether promises are moving. They provide common definitions for words like cleared, approved, and complete.

Maui Recovers now functions as the kind of public-facing accountability tool, first recommended by the city of Santa Rosa and later encouraged for implementation by ATF USA. Transparent and accurate information is crucial because trust is not rebuilt by telling people to calm down. It is rebuilt by demonstrating progress, naming obstacles, and allowing easy access to the data.

The county quickly realized the need to have additional resources and staffing to support recovery and brought on several consulting firms. Most notably has been 4Leaf, Inc. who has provided recovery services in multiple other communities impacted by megafire and whose experience in leading permitting services post-disasters has helped guide Maui’s successful recovery efforts.



*Maui County Recovers Dashboard*

Permits Under Review	Permits Approved	Structure Completed
167 Residential	539 Residential	189 Residential
190 Non-Residential	26 Non-Residential	11 Non-Residential
<b>357 Total</b>	<b>565 Total</b>	<b>200 Total</b>

*Maui County Rebuild Data as of May 11, 2026*

**IV. Why After the Fire Says Maui Has Rounded a Bend**

After the Fire USA does not use language like “rounded the bend” lightly. We use it when a recovery has moved beyond improvisation and into coherence, even if that coherence is still incomplete. In Maui, that shift showed up in several ways at once.

First, promises are being kept and actions are being delivered. For example, the Olowalu temporary debris storage site was never intended as a permanent resting place. The

county promised the debris would be moved and the site restored, and by early 2026 that promise had been kept. In megafire recovery, this matters more than many outsiders realize. People stop believing government because government breaks promises. Keeping one of this scale has moral weight far beyond waste management.



*Temporary debris site, Olowalu*



*Permanent debris site, Pu'unēnē*

Second, collaboration has deepened. We heard repeatedly that partnerships have been made in year three that would not have happened before the fires. We saw county leadership, philanthropy, land stewards, affordable housing developers, local advocacy groups, and cultural leaders in collaborative work that felt more mature, more candid, and more useful than in earlier phases.

Third, hope has changed texture. It was no longer thin or performative. Hope now feels grounded and earned. ATF observed the return of gratitude and a lightness in the air that had not been present before. That does not mean pain has passed. It means the community can begin to imagine itself not only as harmed, but as shaping what comes next.

Fourth, recovery was becoming more legible above and below ground. Above ground, there are cleared parcels, active construction sites, reopened corridors, and affordable housing units with people living in them. Below ground, and harder to see, there are water projects, infrastructure improvements, land strategies, revised preparedness planning, stronger communications, restored working relationships, and a more disciplined housing framework.

Of note, after the 2025 Los Angeles Fires, Maui was able to pay it forward by showing up for Los Angeles and participating in After the Fire USA's *Community to Community* delegations. Managing Director Josiah Nishita has visited Los Angeles three times, including in January 2025 just weeks after the Los Angeles fires, to provide support and guidance. And in July 2025, Mayor Bissen and key members of his executive staff accompanied ATF USA for a week in Los Angeles. These visits demonstrate not only kindness and compassion, but the fact that Maui leaders have the space and bandwidth to help others in need.

Recovery should never be measured only by what is visible above ground. It should also be measured by the foundation beneath it.

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## V. Leadership: Why This Recovery Looks Different Under Mayor Richard Bissen

After the Fire USA has been in enough megafire communities to say this plainly: post-disaster leadership matters, and it sets the tone for everything that follows. Maui's mayor is not the only reason this recovery has advanced, but his leadership choices have mattered materially.

He named reality accurately. In 2024, he did not open his State of the County by declaring resilience and moving on. He said the state of the county was heartbroken, named the dead, and named the displaced. That matters because communities do not trust leaders who sanitize loss.

He built a truth-telling interface. The Mayor's Advisory Council was not created as decoration. As ATF USA heard directly, appointees to the Advisory Council were not the Mayor's supporters; instead, they were trusted members of the community and willing to tell the truth. Their volunteer labor, criticism, and local legitimacy gave the county a mechanism for hearing community voice directly, not only through filtered bureaucratic channels.

Mayor Bissen chose review over defensiveness. Commissioning after-action work on emergency management is not glamorous and invites scrutiny. But that is the point. The county did not treat critique as an insult to authority. It treated it as an obligation to the community and a path toward improvement.

The Mayor made housing decisions that were politically costly but necessary. Review of short-term rental structures, support for Bill 9, coordination with community-based organizations including Lahaina Strong as well as delivering on promised zoning changes signaled a willingness to confront the way the old housing system was harming local survival. Every disaster community says it wants to keep locals in place. Maui's county leadership has at least been willing to take on some of the policies that slogan requires.



*Maui News Now – December 2025*

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Mayor Bissen addressed recovery challenges with action by creating an Office of Recovery, first led by now Managing Director Josiah Nishita and currently led by John Smith, the former chief of Roads and Highways. Mr. Nishita and Mr. Smith are trusted members of the community and were on the frontlines during and immediately after the fires, struggling alongside their neighbors. They both have the experience and knowledge to lead a multi billion-dollar recovery by advocating for and maximizing federal dollars to restore community trust and rights. Mayor Bissen reorganized the Maui Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and appointed Amos Lonokaiolua-Hewitt as MEMA Director. He faced the county's communication failures head on by creating redundancy and systems that allowed staff to connect and better serve the community, including appointing Laksmi Abraham as Director of Communications and Government Affairs to serve the whole county, not just Lahaina.

The Mayor also kept promises in symbolically loaded contexts. The debris transfer and restoration commitment is the clearest example. People notice whether leadership does what it said it would do when the work is difficult, controversial, and emotionally heavy. That credibility becomes recoverable civic capital.

After the Fire USA's praise here is not flattery. It is comparative judgment shaped by experience. We have seen communities where leadership obscures, deflects, or performs empathy without follow-through.

**What we saw in Maui in February 2026 was steadier, more accountable, and more grounded in the standard that matters most: whether 'ohana can come home and help shape what comes next.**

## VI. Culture, Land, and the Future Lahaina Is Reaching For

One of the most important things Maui is doing is refusing to reduce recovery to square footage and permits. Housing is first, as it should be. But recovery that stops at housing would still be incomplete. Lahaina is a living cultural landscape. Its restoration requires attention to water, sacred sites, historic identity, and the social meaning of place.

Our February 2026 visit underscored this vividly at Moku'ula and Loko o Mokuhinia, the sacred former royal complex in the heart of old Lahaina. Long before colonial diversion and later development, this was a water-rich system of ponds, springs, taro, fishponds, and community life. Plans advancing to restore land and waterways there are massive not only because of physical scope, but because they represent an effort to restore balance, memory, and cultural authority.

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The same is true in the broader mauka-to-makai frame. Seeing watershed restoration and water system work alongside housing and fire resilience made something very plain: resilience cannot be piecemeal. In Hawai'i, everything upslope affects everything downslope. Policy that ignores that relationship is not just incomplete. It is wrong.

This is where Maui's recovery may prove especially instructive to other communities. It is not treating culture as a ceremonial add-on after the "real" decisions are made. It is treating culture as an integral part of how the real decisions are made.

## VII. Visible Progress: Debris, Permits, and the Long Return of Lahaina Town

The visible side of recovery still matters. It is not enough on its own, but it matters. By early 2026, Maui was able to point to the largest debris operation in state history, with more than 400,000 tons of wildfire debris removed, 100 percent of residential and commercial parcels cleared, and active rebuilding underway across Lahaina. Debris removal remains one of the most critical milestones in recovery, directly affecting permitting timelines, environmental safety, and survivor return and Maui's efforts aligns with national recovery benchmarks (Marshall Fire (2021) ~300,000+ tons).

In Kula, recovery looks different. Kula lost roughly two dozen structures in the August 2023 fires. It was the same day, the same wind event, but a very different fire and a very different landscape. Rural, spread out, fiercely independent. In rural communities, collective action is not optional. It is essential. Mālama Kula has had to innovate, building practical, on-the-ground strategies to serve residents across wide terrain with limited infrastructure, clearing the gulches, removing invasive wattle, and restoring native ecosystems that are more fire resilient.



*Lahaina: December 2025*



*Restoration of Lahaina's historic waterways*

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The 2026 State of the County described approximately 300 active construction sites, 151 completed permits, 552 additional approved permits, and hundreds more in the pipeline. It also described more than 456 residential and multifamily units fully constructed in Lahaina Town since the fire. Those figures should be read with care. They do not mean the community is “back”. Rather, they mean that the rebuild is no longer hypothetical.

Commercial recovery remains slower than housing, as it does in nearly every major fire recovery. That pattern can be painful, especially in a place where livelihood, identity, and place are braided together. But what we saw in February 2026 was not stasis. We saw the reopening of Lahaina Harbor, movement in the commercial corridor, and a growing understanding that this stage of recovery requires alignment among landowners, business operators, infrastructure systems, coastal regulations, and cultural stewardship.

After the Fire USA’s assessment is the same that we witness in all recoveries: commercial comes back last. That is hard, but it is normal. The more important question is whether the sequencing is anchored in survivor stabilization rather than optics.

**In Maui, the strongest evidence suggests that housing first has remained the right center of gravity.**

## VIII. The Partnership Ecology Around Recovery

One of the reasons Maui feels different at two and a half years is that the partnership ecology has thickened. Hawai‘i Community Foundation, through the Maui Strong Fund, has raised more than \$212 million and still retained substantial funds for the current phase of recovery as of late December 2025. That money does not replace government, but it does create room for community-centered response, innovation, and long-term commitments that public systems alone often struggle to carry.

We also saw the continued importance of organizations such as Maui Rapid Response, Lahaina Strong, Mālama Kula, Native Hawaiian Philanthropy, Kamehameha Schools, Hawaiian Community Foundation, and the Lahaina Community Land Trust. Each occupies a different lane. Some advocate. Some convene. Some fund. Some steward land and water. Some solve highly practical household problems. Together, they form part of the social infrastructure that makes a whole-of-community recovery possible. Articles like [AP News Article - Cash Assistance](#) demonstrate the necessity and success of collaboration.

This matters for another reason. In year one after disaster, communities are often too stunned to coordinate deeply, and work is often just reactive. By year three, stronger recoveries begin to show more intentional division of labor. In Maui we saw a clearer pattern of who is carrying what, where coordination is real, and where philanthropy, government, and community leadership are no longer working at cross purposes quite as often.

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## IX. Maui Recovers Expands to Meet the Kona Storms

The April 2026 Kona storms highlight a growing national pattern: compound disasters, where communities experience multiple hazard events within short timeframes (NOAA, 2024; FEMA, 2025).

These storms should not be understood as a reset to Maui's recovery. They are better interpreted as a real-time stress test of the improved emergency management and recovery systems built since the 2023 fires.

The critical measure is not only the scale of damage, but whether systems held under pressure.

Post-wildfire flooding risk remains elevated for 3–5 years following major burn events, with peak vulnerability in the first 1–2 rainy seasons (USGS, 2024). In Maui County, this translates into continued exposure to runoff, erosion, and infrastructure stress.

Even within this elevated risk environment, Maui County moved quickly to integrate response and recovery efforts under the existing Maui Recovers structure. Leadership aligned the storm response under the same centralized coordination model led by John Smith, ensuring continuity in decision-making, resource allocation, and public communication.

This rapid integration matters. It reflects a fundamental shift from fragmented, event-specific response toward a more durable, all-hazards recovery framework. Maui is no longer building systems in real time. It is deploying effective systems it has put in place.

Operationally, several strengths were evident:

- **Emergency Communications:** Messaging from MEMA and county leadership was timely, clear, and consistent. Residents received timely, actionable information in advance of and during the storm, a marked improvement.
- **Interagency Coordination:** County departments and partners demonstrated stronger alignment, reducing confusion and duplication of effort.
- **Community Activation:** Residents and local organizations mobilized quickly, reinforcing the essential role of community-led response.

While risk remains high, system performance has improved in measurable ways. The Kona storms therefore serve not as a divergence from Maui's recovery trajectory, but as evidence that the trajectory of a more coordinated, resilient, and functional system is holding under real-world conditions.

At the same time, the storm exposed ongoing vulnerabilities. Damage to roads, drainage systems, and other infrastructure raises concerns about the resilience of critical systems under repeated stress. The presence of sinkholes and significant roadway impacts may affect not only immediate mobility but also longer-term recovery timelines, particularly if repairs are delayed.

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Equally important is the human dimension. Maui's residents are navigating cumulative trauma. Wildfire loss, prolonged displacement, economic pressure, and now another disaster event has created a layered recovery environment. Fatigue is real. The need for sustained mental health support, community care, and culturally grounded healing practices is urgent.

Even within these constraints, Maui's trajectory remains intact. They have been the recipient of federal support far superior to other recoveries, including receiving a critically-needed third year of a housing mission.

The county has demonstrated that it can respond more effectively, communicate more clearly, and coordinate more cohesively than it could even one year ago. The community has demonstrated, again, that it will show up for one another.

And so far, the systems, leadership, and community strength that Maui has built are holding, even with unprecedented challenges impacting recovery like tariffs and supply chain disruptions. The people of Maui want better and deserve the best.

**This moment does not reset Maui's recovery. It tests it.**



*Lahaina – February 2026*

## X. After the Fire USA Engagement in Maui

This report intentionally separates Maui’s recovery arc from ATF USA’s role in it. Maui is leading Maui. After the Fire USA’s role has been to walk alongside, share lessons from other megafire communities, and connect people, practices, and perspectives across disasters.

ATF USA’s Maui work has included implementing our *Community to Community* program by bringing delegations of survivor leaders, local government practitioners, philanthropy, housing and permitting experts, emergency management professionals, and mental health specialists to the island. We have met with county, state, federal, community, cultural, and philanthropic leaders because no single lens is sufficient in a recovery this complex.

ATF USA’s recommendations that appear to have been adopted or advanced include a public recovery dashboard, support for community-facing planning rather than closed recovery design, emphasis on mental health as a long game, and the value of mutual-aid knowledge loops between communities that have already lived through megafire.

Maui has also fed back into ATF USA’s wider work. The county and community helped sharpen how our network thinks about cultural grounding, anti-displacement strategy, and how to distinguish visible rebuilding from the invisible work that makes rebuilding durable. Maui’s leaders and community voices were carried into ATF USA’s annual wildfire leadership summit conversations and network learning, where they now shape how other communities think about their own future recoveries.

The communication record matters too. The delegation posts, summit participation, and return visits document something simple but important: partnership that is sustained rather than performative. In disaster work, showing back up matters.



*After the Fire USA Delegation – February 2026*

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## XI. Ten Recovery Lessons Emerging from Maui

The longer lesson set can stand on its own as an appendix or companion piece. For this report, After the Fire USA distills the key lessons as follows:

1. Trust is not a soft value. It is a public-safety capability and once broken, it must be rebuilt through repeated truth-telling and visible follow-through.
2. Emergency alerts must be redundant, reliable, and publicly understood. A siren no one hears or no one understands is not a system.
3. Housing protection must begin immediately after disaster, not after the response phase, because displacement takes root early.
4. Communities need structural defenses against predatory investors and land loss, including land trusts, bridge financing, and anti-foreclosure tools.
5. Water resilience and water governance belong at the center of megafire planning, especially where power loss can collapse firefighting capacity.
6. Transparency tools reduce rumors, restore dignity, and build accountability when the public cannot safely enter the burn zone.
7. Strong local leadership means truth-telling, not image control, and it requires formal channels for criticism as well as praise.
8. Mental health recovery lasts for years and must be funded like infrastructure, because trauma does not operate on a construction schedule.
9. Cultural preservation is not optional. It is part of what makes home, home, and it has to sit at the table with housing, utilities, and roads.
10. Long-term recovery is inherently multi-sector. No one institution can carry it alone, and stronger recoveries build partner networks before the next fire.

## XII. Conclusion: What Maui Is Teaching America about Megafire

Maui is teaching the rest of the country that recovery must be judged by much more than press conferences, ribbon cuttings and rebuilt facades. Success in recovery must be judged by whether a community confronts the conditions that made a disaster more punishing in the first place.

That means housing systems that stop exporting and exploiting local families. It means warning systems that are reviewed honestly and rebuilt for redundancy. It means water and land are treated as part of a living whole. It means government willing to hear hard truths. It means philanthropy that aligns with community-defined priorities. And it means the long discipline of getting people home while protecting what home means.

After the Fire USA's clear-eyed view is this: Maui still has years of work ahead. There is no honest shortcut around that. But Maui has embraced big ideas, big responsibilities, and a larger vision for what comes out the other side. The county and the community are not simply trying to replace what burned. They are trying to build a fairer, stronger and more accountable future.

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**That is why this moment matters. Not because the work is done,  
but because the direction is now visible.**

## Appendix A. Delegation Snapshot and Sectors Engaged

After the Fire USA’s February 2026 delegation roster brought together leaders in disaster recovery, philanthropy, permitting, housing, fire service, public works, behavioral health, and community resilience. Across Maui visits through early 2026, ATF met with county leadership, federal and state partners, grassroots leaders, cultural stewards, philanthropic actors, affordable housing developers, land trust leaders, and community-based care networks. That breadth matters because recovery competence is never produced inside one office.

Delegation capacities represented	Sectors engaged in Maui
Survivor leaders	County of Maui leadership
Disaster housing experts	Maui Emergency Management and federal partners
Public works and permitting leaders	Lahaina Strong and Maui Rapid Response
Fire service and emergency managers	Lahaina Community Land Trust
Behavioral health and trauma specialists	Kamehameha Schools and watershed stakeholders
Community foundation and philanthropy leaders	Affordable housing and interim housing partners

## Appendix B. Works Cited and Further Reading

Key sources are listed below for readers who want to go deeper. Because this report is designed for broad public readership, the list combines uploaded working documents with public materials cited inside those documents.

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15. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). National Preparedness Report (2025); Disaster Declarations Database (2026).
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18. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Wildfire impacts on water systems (2023). Urban Institute. Housing Recovery After Disasters (2022).
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20. California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). Debris Reports (2022).

## Appendix C. The Ten Lessons, Expanded for Community Use

**Trust:** Trust regrows when government shows its work, meets routinely, and allows correction in public.

**Alerts:** Redundancy means sirens, cell alerts, door-to-door warnings, radio, and public understanding working together.

**Housing:** The first housing question after megafire is not abstract supply. It is who gets to stay.

**Anti-displacement:** Cash offers, underinsurance, and debt can strip a community of land long before rebuilding is visible.

**Water:** If hydrants fail and people cannot trust the water, the path home remains broken.

**Transparency:** A dashboard cannot heal grief, but it can cut through rumor and help survivors see whether work is moving.

**Leadership:** Communities can tolerate hard truths more than they can tolerate spin.

**Mental health:** Healing is slower than rebuilding and must be resourced for adults, youth, and caregivers alike.

**Culture:** A rebuilt structure without the culture of place is not recovery. It is replacement.

**Partnership:** Government, philanthropy, nonprofits, culture keepers, and survivors each hold a piece of the work.



*Kula Rebuild: February 2026*



*Kula Rebuild: September 2025*

**After the Fire USA continues to believe in the people of Maui and their ability to recover, rebuild, and move forward with intention.**

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