

Hawaii lists 338 missing from wildfires

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Much of Lahaina was destroyed by a fast-moving wildfire on Maui. (Photo by NYT)

Honolulu, August 26 (RHC)--Hawaiian officials have released a list of 338 names who are still missing after the deadliest wildfire in U.S. history hit the country's island of Maui two weeks ago.

While the FBI has a list of up to 1,100 people reported missing that it is working to vet, the list of 388 released Friday included people for whom officials had validated first and last names. "The 388 names are a subset of a larger list," Steven Merrill, a special agent from the FBI's Honolulu field office, told a press conference in Maui.

"I don't want to lose sight of the fact that we still have hundreds of other names where we still need more information," he added. The official death toll from Aug. 8 fires on the island is at 115 and is likely to rise further, as search teams are still sifting the affected areas.

The toll makes the fires on Maui one of the worst natural disasters in Hawaii's history, and the nation's deadliest wildfires since 1918, when blazes in northeast Minnesota killed hundreds of people.

Water in parts of West Maui is still not safe to drink because damaged pipes have allowed chemicals to seep into the water supply, the county government said. More than two weeks after wildfires swept across Maui, state officials are asking relatives of those missing in the disaster to submit DNA samples so that they can better identify any remains found among the ashes.

But it can take months or even years of forensic analysis and DNA testing to identify the dead, similar to the aftermaths of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina and the wildfire that devastated Paradise, California.

Officials said the slow pace of identifying victims has been dictated by the large-scale destruction and by Maui's remoteness. Search teams say they had finished combing through all of the residential properties in Lahaina, the historic town of 13,000 that was largely destroyed by the fires.

No single cause has been determined, but experts said one possibility was that active power lines that fell in high winds had ignited a wildfire that ultimately consumed Lahaina. Maui County on Thursday sued Hawaiian Electric for failing to shut down its equipment despite warnings that the high winds could knock down power lines.

The fire was fanned by the winds of a cyclone churning hundreds of miles away and fueled by recent heat and drought conditions, worsened by the climate crisis, as well as the proliferation of flammable, non-native grasses.

The devastating wildfire forced thousands of people to evacuate their homes, while a state of emergency had been declared. Survivors, some of whom jumped into the Pacific Ocean to escape the flames, have said they had little or no warning, prompting officials to launch reviews of the island's emergency alert protocols.

It has raised concerns that many of the victims were children. Many of those identified so far were elderly people.

The situation in Hawaii has recalled scenes of devastation elsewhere in the world this summer, as wildfires caused by record-setting heat have forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people in Greece, Spain, Portugal, and other parts of Europe, and western Canada suffered unusually severe fires.



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