

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on Wildfire Damage and Recovery Efforts in Lahaina, Hawaii

August 21, 2023

The President. Well, hello, people of Maui.

Audience members. Aloha!

The President. You've shown such absolute, incredible courage, and that's not hyperbole. I want you to know, on behalf of the United States of America and all the Nation, the American people stand with you.

Governor Josh Green, you've been incredible. From the day we've spoken on this, you've been way ahead of the curve. Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke; Brian Schantz [Schatz; White House correction], our Senator; Senator Mazie—by the way, Mazie, I told my granddaughter, whose name is Maisy as well—she said, "That's why I like her." [Laughter] Anyway.

Senator Mazie K. Hirono. Thank you.

The President. But her name is Maisy as well.

And Jill Tokuda, Representative Ed Chase, and Mayor Rick Bassen [Bissen; White House correction]. Rick, when we talked on the phone, I never—you look like you played in defensive tackle for—I don't know who, but somebody good. But any rate, I want to thank you for your leadership in this unimaginable—during this unimaginable tragedy.

To my left is the banyan tree beloved by this community for over 150 years here in the former capital of the Kingdom of Hawaii that has stood for generations as a sacred spot of exceptional significance.

One of the people who took me under his wing when I first got to the Senate was Danny Inouye. He used to talk about—used to talk about—the Kingdom of Hawaii. He was—came from Japan, but it was amazing to listen to him.

Today, it's burned, but it's still standing. The tree survived for a reason. I believe it's a powerful—a very powerful symbol of what we can and will do to get through this crisis. And for this—for as long as it takes, we're going to be with you. The whole country will be with you.

You know, we will be respectful of these sacred grounds and the traditions that rebuild the way the people of Maui want it built, not the way others want it built. We're going to rebuild the way the people of Maui want it built.

But you know, it's going to be hard. America's deadly wildfire—deadliest wildfire in over a century. And Jill and I have what's left of—walked Front Street, what's left of it. We've surveyed the damage from the air as well. The devastation is overwhelming. To date, 114 dead. Hundreds of people are unaccounted for.

I remember when I got the call—my first wife and daughter—I was a young Senator, and I got a call in Washington. I hadn't been sworn in yet. I wasn't old enough. And I was hiring staff in the Capitol in Teddy Kennedy's office. And I got a phone call saying—from my fire department, and the young first responder kind of panicked and said: "You've got to come home. There's been an accident." I said, "What happened?" He said: "Your wife, she's dead. Come home. Come home."

A tractor-trailer had broadsided her and killed her in a car accident along with my little daughter. And I remember all the way down from Washington home wondering what a lot of

people here are wondering: What about my two boys? How are they? They were in the car. I never got a read on that. Were they going to be all right or badly injured? Were they going to make it? Had they made it? It wasn't until I walked into the emergency room, and I saw that they were there.

The difference between knowing somebody is gone and worrying whether they're available to come back are two different things.

You know, and I remember one of the people who helped me the most was Danny Inouye. He helped bring me back. So I know the feeling that—as many of the people in this town, this community, that hollow feeling you have in your chest like you're being sucked into a black hole, wondering, "Will I ever—will I ever—get by this?"

You know, it's one thing to know, but it's quite another thing to have to wait, to wonder whether your family members are going to be okay.

Imagine being a parent wondering where your child is—where he is. I remember, as I said. You know, press reports of grandfathers crying for lost neighbors while trying to be strong for the ones who survived; of a woman distributing clothing to survivors who says she didn't lose her home, but she lost her hometown.

But I also want all of you to know the country grieves with you, stands with you, and we'll do everything possible to help you recover, rebuild, and respect culture and traditions when the rebuilding takes place.

My administration has been in constant contact with the Governor and congressional delegation and local leaders. As soon as I got the Governor's request, I signed the master—the major disaster declaration that mobilized the whole-of-Government response, which means whatever you need, you're going to get.

For example, the Coast Guard and Navy immediately supported maritime search-and-rescue operations, while the Army helped fire suppression.

Here's what—here's what we've been doing since. First, we focused on search and rescue, which is still going on. Right now there are over 450 search-and-rescue experts working round the clock.

Second, I've identified FEMA's Administrator Griswell [Criswell; White House correction] to lean forward, as she always has done, to help survivors get immediate aid. FEMA has quickly provided five—55,000 meals, 75,000 liters of water, 5,000 beds, 10,000 blankets. We're working to help remove the debris, repair roads, and restore power.

Additionally, my Department of Homeland—of Housing and Urban Development is working with the State to make sure survivors can move from emergency shelters into temporary housing to finally have a permanent place to call home as well.

The Small Business Administration is making low-interest Federal disaster loans available to Hawaiian businesses—many of them you see here burned to the ground—homeowners and renters, and nonprofits.

If you need help, you can visit FEMA's disaster recovery center at Maui College or go to disasterassistance.gov—disasterassistance.gov.

Today I'm appointing Bob Fenton, who's here—where are you, Bob?

Federal Emergency Management Agency Region 9 Administrator Robert J. Fenton, Jr. I'm right here, sir.

The President. There he is. I'm appointing Bob Fenton as our Chief Federal Response Coordinator for Maui to lead our long-term recovery work. He's one of the Nation's most experienced disaster response and recovery experts in America, and I'm directing him to make sure the community has everything—everything—the Federal Government can offer to heal and to rebuild as fast as possible.

And we're focused on what's next. That's rebuilding a long—long-term—rebuilding for long term and doing it together to help get us back on our feet, to rebuild the way we want to rebuild by making sure your voices are heard, by respecting your traditions, by understanding the deep history and meaning of this sacred ground and establishing your community, not to change its character, but to reestablish it.

We're also going to bring the capabilities to help you rebuild so your critical infrastructure is more resilient in the future. The—all this matters.

Let me close with this. From stories of grief, we've seen so many stories of hope and heroism, of the aloha spirit. Every emergency responder put their lives on the line for—to save others. All—everyday heroes, neighbors helping neighbors, Native Hawaiian leaders offering solace and strength.

And this banyan tree. One called it the "diamond in the rough of hope." Another referred to—"Fire cannot reach its roots" is what he said. "Fire cannot reach its roots." That's Maui. That's America. And to the people of Hawaii, we're with you for as long as it takes, I promise you.

May God bless all those we've lost, may God find those who we haven't determined yet, and may God bless you all. And may God protect our troops.

Now I'm going to—happy to turn this over to the Governor, Governor Green.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:47 p.m. at the Lahaina Banyan Court Park. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. Jill N. Tokuda; Mayor Richard T. Bissen, Jr., of Maui County, HI; and Lahaina, HI, resident Tiffany Kidder Winn.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Wildfire damage and recovery efforts in Lahaina, HI.

Locations: Lahaina, HI.

Names: Bassen, Richard T., Jr.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Chase, Edward M.; Criswell, Deanne Bennett; Fenton, Robert J., Jr.; Green, Joshua B.; Hirono, Mazie K.; Luke, Sylvia; Schatz, Brian E.; Tokuda, Jill N.; Winn, Tiffany Kidder.

Subjects: Disaster assistance, Hawaii; Emergency shelters and temporary housing, Federal assistance; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Hawaii, disaster assistance; Hawaii, Governor; Hawaii, Lieutenant Governor; Hawaii, President's visit; Hawaii, wildfire damage and recovery efforts; Natural disasters, wildfires in Hawaii; Small Business Administration; Small businesses, low-interest loans.

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