

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 28, 2025

Mr. Bob Fenton
Regional Administrator, Region 9
Federal Emergency Management Agency
1111 Broadway, Ste 1200
Oakland, CA 94607-4052

Dear Mr. Fenton:

On behalf of our Maui constituents, mahalo to you, your team, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for your continued work to support Maui's recovery from the August 2023 fires (DR-4724-HI). As the March 1 deadline approaches, we write to request a delay in the implementation of fair market rent collection for Direct Housing households for survivors of the Maui fires.

Section 408(c) of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act provides flexibility for FEMA to delay the collection of rent at the end of the 18-month period on March 1, 2025. This flexibility to determine whether rent is charged and what amount would be appropriate is further reflected in 44 CFR 206.117(b)(1)(ii)(F). FEMA has used this flexibility for previous Direct Housing missions in other parts of the country, including in Louisiana (DR-1603, DR-1607, DR-1786, DR-4277, and DR-4611).

This delay of rent collection is justified given Maui's ongoing housing and economic crisis. An October 2024 report found that, in the year after the Maui fires, 80 percent of West Maui residents were displaced from their homes.¹ Fire-impacted households were paying on average 43 percent more rent for the same or fewer bedrooms, and at least 14 percent of surveyed households were living in crowded conditions.² Many households continue to struggle with other unmet needs in financial support and food.

At the same time, West Maui communities are still struggling with economic insecurity as they work to rebuild the local economy. Almost 30 percent of fire-impacted households are now living below the poverty line after experiencing significant drops in household income, and unemployment among survivors has increased significantly. According to a Hawai'i State Rural Health Association report, over 70 percent of fire survivors reported cutting back on groceries and food for financial reasons.³

¹ "One Year After the Wildfires: Rising Poverty and Housing Instability Point to Ongoing Gaps in Assistance," The Economic Research Organization at the University of Hawai'i, 8 October 2024, <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/OneYearAfterTheWildfires.pdf>.

² Ibid.

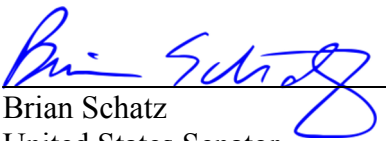
³ "Wildfire Assessment: Findings from a survey of 2,097 residents of Maui County and 1,105 fire-impacted individuals," Hawai'i State Rural Health Association, June 2024, https://hsrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Maui-Together-Assesment_Final-.pdf.

These ongoing challenges have led to our greatest fear: that too many Maui residents have had to make the heartbreaking choice to permanently leave their homes and communities. Reports indicate that over 1,000 Maui residents have left the island, with about half of them leaving Hawai'i entirely.⁴ For those who remain, the March 1 deadline presents a daunting financial cliff that could exacerbate existing challenges and further drive a growing exodus of our residents.

FEMA has the authority and flexibility to provide immediate relief to our constituents in their difficult recovery. On behalf of our Maui constituents and given the ongoing challenges with housing survivors, we respectfully request your assistance in delaying the collection of fair market rent at this time.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Brian Schatz
United States Senator


Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator


Ed Case
Member of Congress


Jii Tokuda
Member of Congress

⁴ "UHERO: Maui wildfires trigger population loss, economic impact," University of Hawai'i News, 14 January 2025, <https://www.hawaii.edu/news/2025/01/14/migration-effects-maui-wildfires/>.