HAWAIʻI EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
Keʻena Hoʻomalu Pōulia O Hawaiʻi

Laulima

Working Together

A Quarterly Newsletter for Our Partners and Community I Ianuali/January 2026

Photo: Team Rubicon

Team Rubicon fills fire mitigation needs on Hawaiʻi Island

A three-mile wildfire fuel break for Waikōloa Village on Big Island is nearing completion thanks to a recent operation led by Team Rubicon, a non-profit disaster aid powerhouse based in Los Angeles. 29 Greyshirts – as Team Rubicon volunteers are called – worked for eleven days to remove highly flammable kiawe trees

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Heartbeat of Hanalei: River restoration on Kauaʻi

Hau bush removal along the Hanalei River (brown area seen here) on Kauaʻi has let in sunlight and grown native river ecology while improving water flow. **Story on Page 5.**

Photo: EAO Hawaiʻi

Administrator's Message

By James DS. Barros

I believe this issue of *Laulima* provides excellent examples of proactive communities that are finding ways to improve their resilience. In windswept Waikōloa Village and rainy Hanalei, local people have come together to mitigate their risks of wildfire and flooding.

When it comes to natural disasters, strength really lies at the community level. Proactive communities foresee problems and try to prevent them. Proactive communities have plans and are able to recover more quickly.

If you see a threat in your community, I encourage you to reach over the fence! Get active! Talk to your neighbors, talk to us at HIEMA. There are always options for communities that are willing to put in effort.

We wrap up another very busy year at HIEMA, with wildfires, tsunamis, hurricanes and now flooding. I hope you get quality time with family and friends during this holiday season. When it comes down to it, the people in our communities are the reason we come to work each day at HIEMA. Hauʻoli Makahiki Hou!

ISLANDS REPORT

Hawai‘i Island

Autumn doesn’t only mean the IronMan competition on Hawai‘i Island (although Civil Defense provided support for the event). It also saw community preparedness efforts, such as the tsunami exercise for the Keaukaha area near Hilo International Airport. Six public, private, and charter schools took part in an evacuation exercise and practiced safely moving their pupils to safety, while local neighbors drove the marked evacuation routes to learn how to quickly leave the area in an emergency.

Talmadge Magno, HCCDA

The season also brought increased concerns about the aerial hazards caused by the year-long series of volcanic eruptions from Kīlauea (38 episodes as of Dec. 22). Wind conditions during eruption episodes spread ash, glass particles, tephra, and gases over a wide swath of downwind communities. While most of the impacts have remained within Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park, Civil Defense worked with our partners to increase outreach efforts and offer safety measures via social media, the news and our video podcast on Nā Leo Television.

Maui, Moloka‘i & Lāna‘i

Aloha mai kākou,

MEMA is grateful to announce the completion of the Ukumehame Mile Marker 13.5 Wildfire Risk Reduction Project, which removed hazardous wildfire fuel from 42 acres along Honoapi‘ilani Highway, an area that experienced a dozen fires in the past two years.

Crews established a defensible space by clearing invasive vegetation and removing debris, including:

Amos Lonokailua-Hewett, MEMA

- 176+ tons of solid waste
- Nearly 79 tons of scrap and recycled metal
- 13 tons of damaged EV batteries
- 1,226 tires
- 123 vehicles
- 34 appliances
- 35 non-EV batteries
- 10 drums of waste oil
- Two boats and heavy equipment

This project was made possible through the collaborative efforts of county, state, federal, and private partners, demonstrating the shared commitment to community safety. We are also wrapping up our Waiale Road Wildfire Mitigation project in Wailuku.

While reflecting on this work, I shared with our team the ‘ōlelo no‘eau: *“He ma‘i pi‘iali‘i ke aloha,”* which translates to *“Love is the ailment of a chief.”* Leadership rooted in aloha carries care, empathy, and responsibility, guiding decisions and keeping leaders connected to the community.

We look forward to sharing additional MEMA initiatives in the new year. Mele Kalikimaka a Hau‘oli Makahiki Hou!

O‘ahu

Aloha from the City and County of Honolulu Department of Emergency Management! As we welcome 2026, we are grateful for all the government, nonprofit, and community partners we worked with in 2025. From increasing public awareness through HNL Alert and thousands of direct connections with community at events to numerous activations of our Emergency Operations Center in response to events including wildfires, approaching hurricanes, and tsunami threats, we could not have done any of it without your participation and support. Mahalo!

Randal Collins, DEM

In 2026, we encourage everyone to join us as we “Resolve to be Ready”. This New Year, our staff are taking large and small steps to increase our personal preparedness. Together, we can make our emergency plans, refresh our emergency supplies, and increase our hazard awareness by staying informed. Acting now means we can all be a bit more prepared when disaster strikes. Happy New Year!

Kaua‘i

Aloha from Kaua‘i! This quarter brought meaningful progress in wildfire awareness and emergency preparedness. Fire Prevention Week kicked off on October 4 at the Kaua‘i Philippine Cultural Center with both local and state partners. The event offered hands-on activities such as fire extinguisher training, CPR demonstrations, wildfire education, fall prevention resources for kūpuna, and interactive games and displays that encouraged keiki and families to learn important safety skills.

Elton Ushio, KEMA

KEMA continued its door-to-door outreach, completing mitigation visits along Kaumakani Avenue and planning another outreach effort in Anahola early next year. These in-person engagements support residents with evacuation messaging, home hardening guidance, and defensible space strategies.

KEMA is also inviting the community to take part in updating the County’s Multi-Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan. Public input plays an important role in shaping priorities, identifying risks, and guiding strategies that strengthen Kaua‘i’s ability to withstand natural hazards. By sharing their experiences and ideas, residents help build a more informed, resilient, and prepared island community.

Team Rubicon builds 3-mile fire fuel break at Waikōloa Village

Continued from front page:

upwind of Waikōloa Village, a community that is particularly susceptible to wildfires because of persistent trade winds channeled between Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa.

The creation of the wildfire fuel break largely grew from an active community association at Waikōloa, which recognized its wildfire risk and became a certified Firewise community in 2016. With the support of its Firewise committee, Waikōloa Village association submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) to Team Rubicon.

"Not all communities have the ability to do the work necessary to reduce their risk," says Shelly Aina, a Waikōloa Village resident who volunteered with Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization as a risk assessor for several years before joining Team Rubicon in 2023, and now volunteers as Hawai'i Island's Team Rubicon Administrator.

"This is where Team Rubicon and other non-profits can step in to do some of the 'heavy lifting,'" she says. "Taking down dangerous and invasive trees can be out of reach for some residents and communities. Some of our kūpuna do not have the physical ability to clear brush or create no-fire zones around their homes."

"Team Rubicon is executing disaster mitigation and response in Hawai'i County," observes Hawai'i County Civil Defense Agency Administrator Talmadge Magno, "supporting local communities with high fire-danger risk by reducing non-native fuels that could contribute to the start and spread of fires."

Team Rubicon, with 200,000 volunteers and 120 paid full-time employees across the USA, operates within the same National Incident Management System (NIMS) framework that emergency management agencies use, including the use of Incident Command Structure (ICS) forms and after-action reports. Team Rubicon deploys teams to global disasters, including recent incidents such as Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica, the Guadalupe River floods in Texas, and Western Alaskan flooding from Typhoon Halong remnants. As available, they execute mitigation efforts such as the Waikōloa fuel break.

Team Rubicon Greyshirts remove kiawe tree wildfire fuel to create a fire fuel break upwind of Waikōloa Village on Hawai'i Island. *Photo: Team Rubicon*

A three-mile fuel fire break upwind of Waikōloa Village involves the felling of nearly 300 kiawe trees. *Photo: Team Rubicon*

"For this operation, we needed sawyers, swampers (to drag material), chipper operators, heavy equipment operators and general responders, as well as Command and General Staff," Aina says.

"These volunteers have achieved a skill standard to responsibly operate dangerous equipment and conduct heavy labor in a harsh environment, and they display a true dedication of service to the community," says HCCDA Administrator Magno. "Each of us can be thankful for and respect these volunteers."

In Waikōloa, Team Rubicon's Greyshirt operation included 23 Hawai'i residents and six from the continent. Aina worked as the liaison officer, coordinating local donations of food and lodging for Team Rubicon volunteers by the Kohala Coast Resort Association.

"There is still more to be done," says Aina, "This may mean another operation, or it may be completed with a few smaller service projects."

The Waikōloa fuel break, at 3.2 miles long with 291 kiawe trees identified for felling, stands about two-thirds completed. Once it is finished, the Waikōloa Village Association has a five-year maintenance plan in place.

"Fire mitigation projects are always in demand," says Aina. "I can say, without hesitation, that wildfires are here to stay and that climate has and will continue to impact the frequency and severity of these fires."

Stormy Weather BOOK CLUB

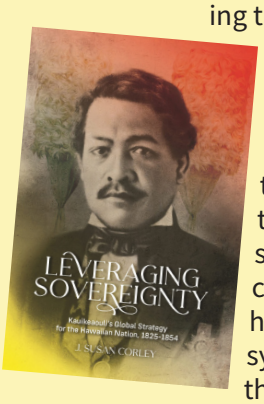
'Leveraging Sovereignty': King Kamehameha III's role in Hawai'i's global emergence

Leveraging Sovereignty: Kauikeaouli's Global Strategy for a Hawaiian Nation by J. Susan Corley

Review by Evan Mokuahi-Hayes, HIEMA Community Outreach Planner

In *Leveraging Sovereignty*, author J. Susan Corley reveals how much more there is to understand about King Kamehameha III, born Kauikeaouli. Too often he is described as a young king swept up in forces beyond his control. Corley shows instead a leader who recognized the changing world and reshaped Hawai'i so that his people could stand within it. Under his guidance, Hawai'i became a constitutional nation recognized by international powers. The Declaration of Rights in 1839 and the Constitution of 1840 did more than organize government. They affirmed that maka'āinana possessed rights that foreign nations had to acknowledge, rights rooted in this land and its people.

Kauikeaouli ensured that legal codes, economic texts, and diplomatic instruction were written in Hawaiian so that his people could defend themselves with clarity and purpose. During the Paulet Affair, when British forces seized the kingdom, his restraint preserved lives and made possible the restoration of sovereignty. Later that year Britain and France formally recognized Hawai'i's independence. No other Pacific nation achieved that level of acknowledgement, earned through patience, intellect, and belief in a Hawaiian future.



Corley reveals a ruler strengthening the foundations of national life. Newspapers in Hawaiian carried political thought to the community. Laws created stability and accountability. Public health and financial systems protected the wellbeing of the lāhui. Survival did not happen by accident. It was constructed through diligence and love for the generations still to come.

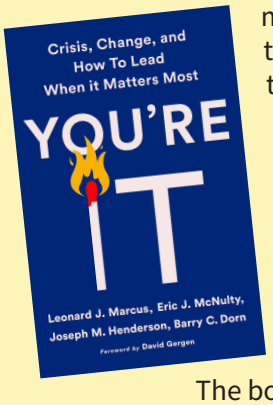
This book affirms that our history is not only marked by loss. It is also built from courage and imagination. Kauikeaouli governed so that Hawaiians would continue to live as a people with a voice among nations. That promise remains ours to keep.

'You're It' analyzes leadership and teamwork in emergency and disaster response

You're It: Crisis, Change and How to Lead When It Matters Most by Leonard J. Marcus, Eric J. McNulty, Joseph M. Henderson and Barry C. Dorn

Review by Harvy King, HIEMA Administrative Assistant

At HIEMA, community is the center of gravity. On any given day there are thousands of tourist visitors that we share the precious resources with here; this includes what arrives here through complex commerce. Hawai'i's local culture of preparedness includes being ready to support them as well as each other. We emphasize our 'ohana emergency plans and how these plans can be socialized with our neighbors. In an incident, the crisis communications and response of the government start and end at the local level, yet the mutual support extends to a presidential level in a time of need.



In a moment of need, will the government be ready? Will your neighbors be ready? Is your family ready? Are YOU ready?

The book *You're It* unpacks how meta-leadership compels us all to work as a team.

I was recommended this book, and I listened to it in audiobook form. *You're It* discusses how new the disaster response mechanisms of society really are, and how they continue to progress and improve through learned experiences from risks that can even be life threatening. Whether these events are human-caused or due to natural disasters, the effects can cripple businesses and government operations. Every person has a story and a part to play, during and after. The book reads like a mantra of readiness, and I recommend it to everyone that believes in the power of community. It makes you feel more connected to action and how to handle crisis at any level.

Ed Sniffen (left), Hawai'i Dept. of Transportation director, receives the award from **David Dentino** (right), Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Housing and Partnerships. *Photo: Spc. Giselle Gonzalez*

Kolekole Pass evacuation route project wins award

The U.S. Army awarded the Army Community Partnership Award to the Kolekole Pass Partnership, a collaboration between the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawai'i Emergency Management Agency and Honolulu Department of Emergency Management.

Hanalei River project improves flow, and native species return

Removal of 13.5 acres of hau bush overgrowth has opened up the Hanalei River to sunlight and better water flow.

Photos: EAO Hawai'i

A major restoration of a crucial portion of the Hanalei River on Kaua'i is yielding promising results after the removal of invasive hau bush along its banks. EAO Hawai'i has led the effort as part of the North Shore Flood Mitigation Grants that were disbursed following the 2018 Kaua'i North Shore floods, which set national records for 24-hour rainfall and caused over $100 million in damage on Kaua'i.

"While it is difficult to fully mitigate against extreme or record-setting rainfall, we are already seeing benefits," says Elton Ushio, Administrator of Kaua'i Emergency Management Agency (KEMA). "Vegetation management along the Hanalei River has prevented highway flooding during several recent flash flood warning events," where past stream gauge conditions would have signaled overtopping or road closures.

The restoration project has treated 13.5 acres along a half-mile stretch of the river, including a crucial stretch along Kūhiō Highway between the Hanalei Bridge and the Hanalei Dolphin restaurant that acts as a lifeline for local communities.

In addition to flooding mitigation and public safety improvements, river health evaluations by EAO Hawai'i show that the river's ecology is reviving, including the return of native plant, waterbird and aquatic species.

"Observed effects include a more open river channel that allows improved light penetration and better conditions for native aquatic species to recover," says EAO Hawai'i director Kanoe Ahuna.

She says that native juvenile fish – both freshwater species such as 'o'opu and 'ōpae 'oeha'a as well as reef fish – are now using the newly opened and sunlit river. Endangered waterbirds such as 'alae 'ula and nēnē have also been observed.

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Along the riverbank, the hau roots were intentionally left in place to maintain riverbank stability while removing channel obstruction and debris hazards. Several large albizia trees were also removed. These invasive trees "are known to cause debris jams and hazards when they fall or drop large branches during floods and windstorms," Ahuna says. This vegetation cleanup has improved river flow and navigation.

Grass seeding and volunteer vegetation (involuntary seedling growth) followed the removal of the hau bush and albizia trees, resulting in 80 percent groundcover in areas formerly dominated by hau.

"The riverbank has remained stable, with no significant erosion or increased sediment entering the river," Ahuna says.

"Native plant species, such as hala and 'ae'ae have been observed growing naturally near the riverbank without planting, indicating that native species persist in the seedbed. Continued riparian planting will further stabilize soils and encourage habitat restoration for native waterbirds and aquatic species."

While the physical demands of the removal of dense woody overgrowth have been formidable, Ahuna says that the project's greatest challenges have been coordination and regulatory compliance.

"This stretch of river lies on private property, but involves multiple jurisdictions – including federal, state and county agencies – making the permitting and approval process extensive," she says.

Over 100 bison inhabit that private land, necessitating careful safety planning. Intertidal sections of the river have daily water-level changes that affect the work, and the presence of the endangered 'ōpe'ape'a – the Hawaiian hoary bat – limit the work season to October through May.

Excerpt from Hanalei Watershed Mitigation Study. Areas 7 and 8 not pictured.

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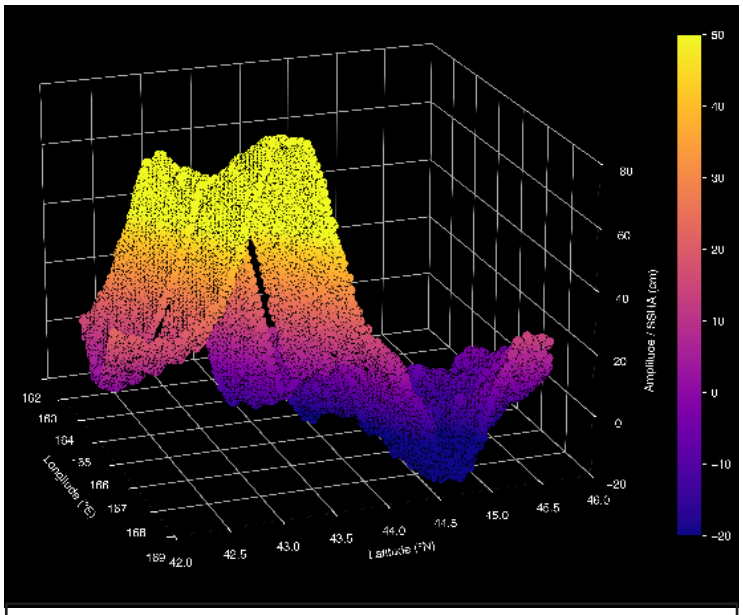
NASA's new satellite captured 'rare' data of July 29 tsunami

Tsunami scientists are reporting the capture of "exceptional" data from the July 29 tsunami event that originated in Kamchatka, Russia, and reached Hawai'i. For the first time, scientists have a high-resolution two-dimensional image of a tsunami wave thanks to the National Aeronautical & Space Administration's (NASA) new Surface Water & Ocean Topography (SWOT) satellite.

Furthermore, comparative analysis of the data with the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) local, real-time forecasting of the tsunami waves reveal that NOAA's prediction was "right on the money," says Josh Willis, an oceanographer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) at California Institute of Technology.

JPL developed the SWOT satellite – the only satellite of its kind in orbit – with the French space agency Centre National d'Études Spatiales (CNES) and launched it in 2022. SWOT measures changes in water levels on the Earth across a swath of 70 miles, taking 21 days to complete a survey of the planet. It's mainly used to track Earth's "water budget" – the planet's water resources and how they move and change – but in this case, caught the leading edge of a tsunami wave.



Advances in interferometry technology enable NASA's SWOT satellite to depict the July 29 tsunami's leading wave in two dimensions, about 70 miles wide. *Image: NASA/JPL*

The significance of SWOT capturing this tsunami data "is pretty exceptional," Willis says. "Also, it's amazing that the satellite overflew the tsunami within just a few hours of its generation, so it caught the wave while it was still quite large."

With only one SWOT satellite in orbit, the probability of capturing this data is very low. Because it can be several days before the data is downloaded to Earth, researchers are using SWOT for analysis of current tsunami forecasting models.

The measurements of open-ocean tsunami waves by the SWOT satellite are "impressive," says Dr. Chip McCreery, director of the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center (PTWC) in Honolulu. "Such data are rare – similar satellite swaths have only been collected in a few instances, and none have been as good."

He says the data "will be very useful for validating real-time tsunami forecasting methods currently in use by PTWC, or for those methodologies under development."

The key technology that sets the SWOT satellite apart is a Ka-band Radar Interferometer (KaRIn), an instrument that measures water surface heights by bouncing signals off of the highly reflective water surfaces and measuring the signals' return to the satellite. KaRIn reveals ocean water levels down to one centimeter of resolution. It operates within the high-frequency Ka-band of the microwave spectrum at a frequency of 35.75 gigahertz (GHz).

Hanalei River– from page 5

The health of the Hanalei River is crucial for Hanalei, a community where generations of residents' lives have been shaped by the river.

"When the river thrives, our community thrives," says Kati Conant, chief strategy officer at Hale Halawai 'Ohana O Hanalei, a local non-profit that is administering the North Shore Flood Mitigation Grants for KEMA. "The Hanalei River is essential to daily life in our community. It is the heartbeat of this 'āina and a defining force in the lives of the people who call Hanalei home. Our community paddles, farms, fishes and gathers along its banks, creating a rhythm of life that is inseparable from the river."

KEMA partnered with Hale Halawai to administer a community-based Request for Proposals process to use over $7 million in disaster funding following the 2018 North Shore floods. EAO Hawai'i was awarded $1.4 milllion for the Hanalei River restoration project.

KEMA Administrator Ushio says a local grant process "ensured proposals were shaped by local knowledge, cultural context and the lived experience of the communities most affected in 2018. It also helped build long-term community ownership of the work."

On the rainy north shore of Kaua'i, flooding will continue to be a part of life, but projects like the Hanalei River restoration project show that targeted, community-based mitigation can strengthen environmental health and resilience, and reduce flooding impacts.

"Looking ahead, we expect high intensity, short duration rain events to remain a challenge," says Ushio. "A strategy that includes engineering improvements, watershed work, community-driven projects and effective early warning continue to be essential."

For Ahuna, "Ultimately this project is not just about replacing hau," she says. "It is about restoring health to the river, rebuilding native habitat, and strengthening the relationship between the community and the 'āina – creating a river system that is more resilient and a community that is deeply invested in its future."