Federal, State and Community Efforts Drive Kula Recovery

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KULA, Hawai?i – It is when Tom Liu talks about all the cherished family heirlooms that were swept away as wildfires raced through his tiny rural community that you begin to understand the enormity of his loss.

His 12th century Japanese katana, his late wife's collection of teapots from four continents, chests his parents brought back from China as gifts for their three children – all gone in a matter of hours.

Despite the loss of his secluded hillside home and treasured possessions, Liu said, "Actually, what I'm going to miss the most is the privacy that's taken away."

The Kula fire started farther up the steep slopes from Liu's house last August, whipped by high winds that incinerated dense stands of Australian black wattle and eucalyptus trees, neither of them native to Hawai?i. The fires spread so rapidly firefighters were forced to make split-second decisions about which properties to save. Twenty-five homes and ?ohana units were destroyed along with 200 acres of mostly wattle forest.

It all unfolded on the same day as forest and grassland burned in nearby Olinda, and other forest fires were ignited above the town of Kihei and on Hawai?i Island. The worst of the wildfires raged on Maui's west side in the historic town of Lahaina.

In the six months since then, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, directed by a major presidential disaster declaration, assigned federal agencies to make available services the local and state governments could not provide on their own. Voluntary aid and nonprofit organizations stepped in with life-saving and life-sustaining essentials like food, shelter, water and medical supplies.

Families were in crisis and FEMA-funded programs were quickly approved to address their needs.

Residents of Kula also took major steps to help themselves. Neighbors came with food and clothing for those who lost everything. Some opened their homes and offered vehicles no longer in use. Others opened a humanitarian aid hub nearby. With firefighters still trying to contain the flames, the Kula Lodge opened the doors of their guest cottages so neighbors had a place to land. It didn't matter that the lodge and restaurant were closed because the fires damaged or destroyed underground drinking water pipelines. People needed shelter the lodge could provide.

The ?ohana spirit – that shared support and kinship that extends across generations and beyond blood relatives alone – was reawakened.

The Kula Community Watershed Alliance was formed in the aftermath to stabilize, protect, restore and maintain the privately owned lands that burned within P?hakuokal? Gulch and the surrounding watershed. The nonprofit has already raised $250,000 of private funds, some of which has gone toward stabilizing the burn scar with a 3-inch-thick blanket of wood chips. The Alliance has spread 2,000 cubic yards of wood chips on the burned areas so far.

“We knew that we had to activate quickly to stabilize the burned places. The soil is going to wash away if we don't do something,” said Sara Tekula, the Alliance's founding executive director. “This area is also known for big storms and flash floods.”

Fire debris removal cleanup was another major priority facing residents, business owners and government agencies. Safety and cultural sensitivities guided every decision. Nothing could be brushed aside to hasten progress – particularly not residents' very real but unfounded fears that by giving the federal government permission to clear their land they were also giving up their ownership.

FEMA Region 9 Administrator Robert Fenton led the federal response, sitting for media interviews, informational workshops, regular town halls and meetings to address the community's concerns.

Before the end of August, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency arrived in Kula for Phase 1 of the cleanup, removing hazardous materials such as paints, solvents, oils, batteries and pesticides from fire-impacted properties. Water is a precious commodity in this agricultural region, and the fires damaged or destroyed underground wastewater pipelines and above-ground pumping stations. EPA supported the County of Maui Departments of Water Supply and Environmental Management to address water and wastewater infrastructure.

As heavy equipment continued to roll into Kula in December, the tightly knit community was actively engaged, with residents watching each new development, making sure federal officials released the results of soil, water and air quality testing.

But even before that, in September, soil scientists and hydrologists from the Burned Area Emergency Response, a program managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, had identified areas with high burn severity.

In these areas, thick non-native vegetation created hydrophobic soil that instead of capturing water forces it to empty into streams and the ocean. The fires made these conditions much worse. The result: The hillsides have a difficult time bouncing back and are far more prone to erosion.

"We're looking at doing a long-term restoration so this never happens again," Tekula said. "If we were to lose our soil … we wouldn't be able to grow anything. But also, it would pollute our fishponds, our wetlands and our ocean."

In the foothills of Kula, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages Ke?lia Pond National Wildlife Refuge, a sanctuary for a variety of waterbirds, including the ?alae ke?oke?o (Hawaiian coot), koloa (Hawaiian duck) and the endangered ae?o (Hawaiian stilt). Many of the species are native and endemic to the Hawaiian Islands.

Lot by lot, the Kula Community Watershed Alliance has begun shoring up the unstable land, placing log erosion barriers and wood chips to help stabilize the soil and prevent it from washing down the slopes into Ke?lia Pond.

By January, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed clearing debris from all 25 burned lots, including Liu's two-bedroom wood-frame house and a small cottage.

The Alliance is working closely with another nonprofit, M?lama Kula, which is heavily engaged in the cleanup and recovery efforts. Kyle Ellison, the organization's president and executive director who helped fight the fires near his rental home, has been a visible presence and a clear voice for the community.

His team is clearing remaining debris from the vacant lots that sit between the homes that burned, removing toxic irrigation pipes and farm machinery as well as clearing green waste before it slides into the gulch.

The Agriculture Department’s Natural Resources and Conservation Service has also surveyed the burned properties and identified what might be funded under its Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

All that remains of the property Tom Liu called home for nearly 20 years is a paved driveway once hidden under a lush canopy of trees, a concrete pad and the dirt lot overlooking the gulch.

At age 83, he has begun what he knows will be a long process of rebuilding his life and his home. He has meetings with his architect to re-envision the new house which, with today’s prices, will have a smaller footprint. And he answers one question the same way whenever it’s asked, even by one of his daughters.

Why rebuild here?

“Everything I have – from my underwear, my socks, my shoes, everything – it’s from donations” from neighbors, he said. “They just can’t help enough. They bring me food and they say, ‘Uncle Tom, you need some shirts, some slacks, come on over.’ They were just unbelievable. The community was just unbelievable.

“And that’s what helped me make up my mind. Where am I going to find a community like this?”