Hawaiian Electric

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Community-led initiative creates firebreak behind Leihōkū Elementary in Waiʻanae to protect students, school

Hawaiian Electric-funded project clears 1,000-plus feet of vegetation

HONOLULU, Aug. 13, 2024 – Students at Leihōkū Elementary in Waiʻanae returned to school last week with an additional layer of protection against wildfires. A 1,000-foot firebreak was cleared along the school's fenceline recently thanks to a community-driven initiative funded by Hawaiian Electric.

The pilot project – which includes clearing vegetation and having students and faculty work with community groups to maintain a natural firebreak – is one that Hawaiian Electric hopes can be done in other locations on Oʻahu and in Maui and Hawaiʻi counties.

"The collaborative project at Leihōkū Elementary shows what's possible when everyone works together to strengthen community resilience," said Kurt Tsue, Hawaiian Electric director of community affairs. "We hope to replicate this holistic approach to wildfire safety by getting behind community-driven wildfire mitigation efforts. Taking these steps, along with making upgrades to our infrastructure to reduce the risk of ignition, are part of our commitment to protect our customers and communities."

Leihōkū Elementary, which sits along the eastern edge of Waiʻanae, has had its fair share of wildfire scares over the years.

"A lot of places are at risk, but there are some places that are higher risk than others. And the community around Leihōkū has seen fires come right up to the school," said Pauline Sato, executive director of Mālama Learning Center. "We've been working with Hawaiian Electric as well as the DOE (Department of Education) to come up with a demonstration project." The fire break at Leihōkū was work that could be completed right away, making it an ideal demo.

More than 1,000 feet of kiawe trees and grasses on Department of Hawaiian Home Lands property have been cleared. But the project has only just begun. The next step is to identify how the school can work with community partners to build and maintain a natural firebreak, possibly by planting aloe, said Disa Hauge, DOE's Nānākuli-Waiʻanae complex area superintendent.

"My kids came here to Leihōkū… and I remember dropping them off and the whole mountain was burning," Hauge said. "I've been a lifelong Waiʻanae resident... and weʻve had fires up and down the coast my whole life. Iʻve seen the mountains burn many, many times. We absolutely have to recognize that this is a dryland forest" and the native species that once protected the area from wildfires are diminished.

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For Eric Enos, executive director of Kaʻala Farm, it made sense that Leihōkū is serving as a demonstration project. “We looked at all the most vulnerable places. And because it’s a school, it’s a lot of children, and it’s a community all around it, and because of the interface with all the dry, mountainous terrain,” Enos said. “And that’s the problem with fires that start in these hills. It’s very difficult to deal with… so that’s why we selected Leihōkū.”

Hauge said the collaboration between the school, community organizations and businesses such as Hawaiian Electric is critical. “That partnership and that openness where we’re not looking to blame, but we’re looking to resolve and solve and project better outcomes into the future for all of us together is important – because together we’ll make a difference.”

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