

The Floods of November: The County's Biggest Challenge in Fiscal 2000-2001

The torrential rains and flooding on November 1-2, 2000 were by far the most major events of the past fiscal year. We were very fortunate that there was no loss of life.

Mayor Stephen K. Yamashiro declared a state of emergency for the Island of Hawaii on the morning of November 3, 2000.

On the afternoon of November 3rd, Governor Cayetano also declared a state of emergency on the Big Island. On November 9th, President Bill Clinton declared the Island of Hawaii a major disaster area. This paved the way for federal relief and recovery assistance to the affected areas.

Disaster assistance to date has totaled over \$88 million.

Flood damage encompassed infrastructure like roads, private homes and businesses as well as public facilities like some fire stations and athletic fields.

Worst hit were Hilo, Ka'u and Puna.

County Workers Swing into Action

The Civil Defense Agency played a major role in coordinating the County's efforts during the onslaught of the November floods.

The agency directed and coordinated evacuation of affected areas and other disaster response operations. It also coordinated requests from individuals and agencies for operational assistance which involved the police, fire-rescue personnel, debris clearance, emergency repairs, health and medical services, shelters and recovery operations.

The Fire Department performed several rescues and evacuations of victims trapped in their homes or vehicles, including the rescue of isolated families by chopper. Following rescue and evacuation, department personnel continued to assist the flood victims.

The flood damage to Highway 11 cut road access to the Pahala fire station, making it accessible only by chopper for several days. Naalehu Station was reachable only by way of Kona. The Fire Administration office in Hilo had to be relocated due to flooding.

The Highway Maintenance Division employees assist in all types of emergencies such as vehicle accidents, hazardous material spills and natural events such as storms, earthquakes, tsunamis and lava flows that disrupt the public's ability to travel county roads.

The division's personnel were put to the test November 1 and 2, 2000, when the South Hilo and Ka'u Districts experienced substantial roadway infrastructure damage with major disruption of their road systems.

One of the flood mitigation projects that division personnel performed received an award of recognition from the American Public Works Association. On this project, our crews constructed an eleven and a half-mile, State Route 11 bypass road for the Ka'u residents of Pahala -- in one week.

This effort was successful thanks to assistance from all of our other Highway Maintenance Districts, as well as the rental of privately owned trucks and equipment that supplemented the County's equipment. The bypass road provided residents, businesses, schools, emergency equipment and visitors with a route to travel in and through the town of Pahala as well as the rest of the Ka'u District.

In Hilo, Kamehameha Avenue was impassable due to high water, with mud and debris covering the entire roadway. Once the water receded, work to remove the mud and debris started, and was completed by the Division's crews in two days.

Roads and drainage channels all through Hilo required immediate attention, and Highway's crews worked around the clock to get the town back on its feet.

In the immediate aftermath, Parks and Recreation personnel were assigned to disaster debris clearance all over East Hawai'i.

The Public Works Department's Automotive Division's task was to keep the vehicles and equipment in safe operating conditions so that the county employees could continue with the massive cleanup after the flood.

Flood Recovery Work Continues

After the November flood, the County's Finance Department handled the receipt of funds from federal agencies, distribution of those funds to the appropriate departments, maintenance of accounting records and preparation of federal reports.

The Office of the Corporation Counsel's litigation division conducted on-site inspections and photographed various flooded sections of East Hawaii. The inspections included interviews of flood victims who were seeking assistance from the County.

Following receipt of flood claims filed by victims at the County Clerk's Office, flood claim files were established, and victims were interviewed at their homes.

Claimants have been and are still being assured and informed that their respective claims have not been ignored. All claims have been placed on a priority list the County is currently reviewing.

The Planning Department assisted in the damage assessment through Geographic Information System analysis and mapping. The department continues to be involved in planning preventive measures in coordination with other agencies by improved flood zone mapping and evaluating various drainage projects.

Research and Development received \$59,469 in FEMA funds for emergency and permanent repairs after flood damage to the Ka'u Ag Water Project in Pahala (now 85% complete). The department also received a \$200,000 EDA grant for a Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The Public Works Department continues to carry out flood repair work, including roadway and ford repairs in and around Pahala, one of the hardest-hit areas.

Parks and Recreation staff are currently working to restore the Hilo Bayfront soccer fields, which were inundated and covered with debris during the floods.