

KOHALA BY THE SEA RECOGNIZED FOR COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PREVENTION EFFORTS

SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY

A South Kohala community recently celebrated 15 years of being part of the National Fire Protection Association's Firewise USA program.

Kohala By The Sea became the first community in the state, in 2004, to be recognized by the association's Firewise USA program, which empowers neighbors to work together and take action to protect their homes from wildfire. At the time, Kohala By The Sea was just the 50th Firewise Community in the nation. Today, Kohala By The Sea is among more than 1,500 Firewise USA sites, including 14 in Hawaii.

On Feb. 21, the community gathered at the South Kohala Fire Station to celebrate the accomplishment.

"As a community, you have recognized the serious risk wildfire poses to your community, and decided to take action," said Rep. David Tarnas (D-North and South Kohala, North Kona). "I hope that your model of collaborative self-management and proactive fire prevention is an inspiration to other communities that they can work together to concretely reduce the risk of wildfire to their homes."

Hawaii Fire Department Assistant Chief Darwin Okinaka said the department is grateful for the collaboration that is key to reducing fire risk in communities.

Surrounded by arid rangeland that grows dense vegetation after ample rainfall during the winter months that turns brown and fire-prone by summer, Kohala By The Sea and other communities along the leeward side of Hawaii Island are particularly vulnerable to wildfires.

The impacts of wildfires on lowland ecosystems are broad and long-lasting, according to the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization, a nonprofit based in Waimea that supports wildfire prevention and protection across the Pacific. Wildfires leaves slopes denuded of vegetation, so that subsequent rains sweep topsoil away, eroding the landscape and polluting near-shore waters with sediment and nutrients. Such sedimentation and nutrient enrichment is highly destructive to coastal water quality, coral reefs, and fisheries.

Decisive actions such as removing leaf litter and other flammable debris near homes, planting native drought-tolerant ground cover in place of invasive grasses and trees, and establishing home and community fire response plans, can significantly reduce communities' fire risks, according to the organization.

Carson Magoon, Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization community education coordinator, said. "Your methods in doing this are inspiring, and the community involvement you have all been able to maintain throughout the years is extraordinary. You and your neighbors have set an excellent example for the rest of state of Hawaii to follow."

The Firewise USA program recognizes community-wide efforts to undertake such actions, educate residents regarding fire hazards, and collaborate with fire prevention stakeholders. Kohala By The Sea has held work days to remove flammable debris; conducted semi-annual reviews to identify and reduce fire fuel; established a "Call-Em-All" system to contact residents in case of emergencies; and even created a digital community map with information to support fire response.

With the assistance of the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization and the commitment of community members, Hawaii Island's leeward communities of Waikoloa Village, Waialea, Puako, Kohala Waterfront, Kanehoa, Waikii Ranch, and Puukapu Pastoral have also achieved Firewise status. The community of Puuanahulu is expected to join them within the next few months.

For more information about the Firewise USA program, visit [www. hawaiiwildfire.org/firewise-communities](http://www.hawaiiwildfire.org/firewise-communities).



Kohala By the Sea Firewise Committee members and board, staff from Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization, Rep. David Tarnas, Assistant Chief Darwin Okinaka, and State Fire Protection Forester Mike Walker receive a sign recognizing the community's 15 years of Firewise certification. COURTESY PHOTO/ SPECIAL TO WEST HAWAII TODAY



Forester Mike Walker said that public involvement is key to protecting natural resources.

“Establishing certain neighborhood protocols to mitigate the risk of wildfires causing destruction within your community is something that every community should practice,”
