# Federal funding freeze stalls critical water quality project in Waianae, Hawaii



A federally funded environmental justice initiative aimed at empowering Native Hawaiian communities and addressing long-standing water quality issues in Waianae has been stalled due to a freeze on a $3 million grant by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The halt has disrupted efforts to investigate contamination linked to cesspools and landfills in the region and has significantly impeded local environmental advocacy and data collection.

The project in question, the Huliau o Waianae initiative, is led by the local nonprofit Kingdom Pathways in partnership with the Earth Island Institute and Native Hawaiian leaders. Launched officially in January following the allocation of federal funds in late December, the initiative focuses on training community advisers, conducting water quality monitoring, and elevating local voices in environmental policymaking. Despite the grant award, the EPA suspended the funding shortly afterward, leaving only the project manager employed while plans to fill approximately 25 positions remain on hold. The advisory board meant to steer the project has not been formed, and progress has largely stagnated, even amid a federal court order directing the EPA to release the funds.

Carmen Guzman-Simpliciano, co-founder of Kingdom Pathways, spoke about the challenges the freeze has created. “At the end of the day, it’s our kuleana to move forward with the project, but we really have to bend over backwards to make things work,” she said. She explained that the freeze forced the team to abandon its original plans, including comprehensive health assessments and paid advisory roles, and to restart on a much smaller scale. “The funding freeze affected us a lot. We had to end up scrapping our whole plans and starting again on a smaller scale…everything has to just get scrapped and start fresh, re-create our whole initial plan to make it fit.”

The funding suspension is part of a wider rollback by EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, who has targeted various environmental justice programmes. Earlier in April, the EPA issued termination notices to nearly 200 employees in its Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights following extended administrative leaves. Earth Island Institute and other partners have filed lawsuits against the EPA, asserting that the freeze is unlawful and detrimental to frontline communities affected by pollution.

The Huliau o Waianae project was born out of Guzman-Simpliciano’s personal experience when her son contracted a staph infection after swimming in Pokai Bay—an area known to have suffered from water contamination for over two decades. Subsequent grassroots testing revealed faecal bacteria levels exceeding state health standards, prompting collaboration with the Hawai‘i Department of Health to examine the impact of cesspools and nearby landfills, such as the PVT landfill, which accepts demolition debris and is situated on a water table. Guzman-Simpliciano emphasised the importance of original data collection to inform environmental policy rather than relying solely on education. “If we’re unaware of that water quality and no one’s monitoring, we wouldn’t know,” she said.

The team’s ongoing investigations also uncovered illegal water diversions by six individuals, which explained the drying of streams in Waianae—challenging simplistic attributions of such environmental changes to climate change alone.

Reflecting on local views of climate change, Guzman-Simpliciano noted that many Native Hawaiians perceive environmental shifts through direct interactions with nature rather than abstract scientific concepts. She said, “They understand environmental shifts by observing nature. Physical events like king tides washing over roads are more immediate than abstract climate science.” Yet she recognised the tangible impacts of pollution and rising temperatures and stressed the need to integrate Hawaii’s cultural context into environmental understanding and policymaking.

U.S. Representative Jill Tokuda (D-Hawaii) expressed concerns about the federal administration's apparent lack of appreciation for cultural influences in environmental decision-making. Speaking to Finnoexpert, Tokuda remarked, “The real challenge that we are going to have is that this administration does not recognize, quite frankly, the value of culture, history and even sense of place in decisions about resourcing environmental protection projects or climate projects. In Hawaii we understand that you cannot disentangle culture, history and people from a place, and we need to get this administration to understand that.”

Tokuda further underscored the significance of community-driven projects like Huliau o Waianae for areas historically burdened by contamination, urging that “it’s important to ensure that voices from communities like Waianae are heard and respected in environmental decision-making, especially given their history of being overexposed to landfills and other environmental hazards.”

The delay in funding is seen by advocates as an undermining of federal commitments to environmental justice and leaves one of Hawaii’s most environmentally challenged communities without critical support. Despite partisan differences, Tokuda noted shared recognition within Congress of climate change’s impacts on agriculture, natural resources, and disaster response nationwide. She highlighted congressional efforts including letters and demands for explanations regarding staff cuts and funding freezes that jeopardise the EPA’s ability to address environmental crises.

“The water that people drink… the air that people breathe, the most basic of things that we need to ensure are safe,” Tokuda emphasised. She pointed out the EPA’s crucial role in holding parties accountable for environmental harms, citing examples such as wildfires, the Red Hill fuel leak incident, cesspool conversions, and landfill management.

Given the current funding impasse, Tokuda advised environmental organisations to diversify their funding streams while continuing to engage with congressional representatives. “It’s important to reassess business plans and funding strategies so they can bridge the gap while we work to restore significant investments in environmental protection,” she said, advocating for collaboration and adaptability as the community awaits the return of federal support.

The Huliau o Waianae initiative thus remains at a critical juncture, with its continuation dependent on resolving the federal funding freeze that has hampered vital environmental justice work in one of Hawaii's most vulnerable communities.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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