

COLUMN

Assistance for the Maui Wildfire

Consulate General of Japan in Honolulu

On August 8, 2023, dry and strong winds caused by the passage of Hurricane Dora sparked wildfires across the Hawaiian Islands. On Maui, at least 102 people lost their lives, and approximately 2,200 buildings in the town of Lahaina and 550 buildings in the district of Kula were damaged. Total damages are estimated at 5.5 billion U.S. dollars, making it the most destructive fire in U.S. history in the past 100 years.

The town of Lahaina, which was particularly hard hit, was the capital of the Kingdom of Hawaii in the early 19th century. It is designated in the National Register of Historic Places and is a historic preservation area. It was home to many historical and cultural buildings and was one of Maui's main tourist destinations. However, the town was burned to the ground in an instant, and many residents and tourists were forced to evacuate with only the clothes on their backs.

Japan and Hawaii share deep and strong historical, cultural, economic, and geopolitical ties. After the fires broke out, Japanese local governments, companies, voluntary organizations, and individuals sent considerable support. The Government of Japan also provided a total of approximately 2 million U.S. dollars in assistance through the American Red Cross and Japan Platform (JPF)¹ for the victims of the disaster. Japan also organized the Kibou for Maui Project in collaboration with the U.S.-Japan Council (USJC),² a Japanese-American organization founded by Japanese-Americans that remains active today. This project seeks to build a more disaster-resilient future by inviting affected students and leaders from the State of Hawaii and the County of Maui to Japan to share Japan's experiences and knowledge in disaster recovery and reconstruction.

One part of the project, the TOMODACHI Kibou for Maui Program invited 21 high school students from Maui to the Tohoku region in March and July, 2024. When the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in Japan in 2011, a similar program called the TOMODACHI Initiative³ was organized by USJC and the U.S. Embassy in Japan. At that time, students from Tohoku were invited to Hawaii to participate in a program that offered spiritual healing through experiential learning. The participants from that time played a central role in welcoming Maui high school students to Japan this time. High school students from Maui said that they saw a ray of hope for the future after interacting with Japanese people and learning about local government reconstruction efforts, disaster risk reduction, environmental protection efforts, and leadership.

In May, a program for the leadership delegation from the County of Maui was held, with a delegation of 15 people visiting Japan led by Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen. In the Tohoku region, they exchanged views with local government officials and visited local companies and energy facilities. In Tokyo, they visited companies engaged in disaster risk reduction and mitigation projects. After returning home in August, a meeting was held where the participating students and leaders shared their experiences in Japan and engaged in lively exchanges of opinions regarding the recovery and reconstruction of the town of Lahaina. The students actively participated in the discussion on how to better develop the town, including ways to maintain a balance between the living environment of local residents and tourism — the main industry in Lahaina — while still respecting its history and culture, efforts toward further economic development, and measures to handle changes in the natural environment.



Participants of the first cohort of the TOMODACHI Kibou for Maui (March, Higashi-Matsushima City, Miyagi Prefecture; Photo: USJC)



Participants in the Kibou for Maui Project leadership delegation program (May, Tokyo; Photo: USJC)

Japan and Hawaii have long fostered people-to-people bonds while cooperating, helping, and learning from each other in response to common challenges, including natural disasters. It is hoped that Japan's support for the Maui wildfire will contribute to the recovery of the affected areas, deepen mutual understanding and trust between Japan and Hawaii, and lead to a future bound by even stronger ties.

- 1 JPF: Japan Platform, or JPF, is an NGO established in August 2000 (obtained NGO status in May 2001). It was established jointly by NGOs, the business community, and the Government of Japan, with the purpose of providing prompt and effective emergency humanitarian assistance activities by Japanese NGOs in response to natural disasters and refugee situations outside of Japan.
- 2 USJC: The U.S.-Japan Council is an educational non-profit organization established in 2009, with headquarters in Washington, D.C. and offices in California, Hawaii, and Tokyo.
- 3 The TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership between USJC and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo that was born out of support for Japan's recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake. It invests in the next generation of Japanese and American leaders through educational and cultural exchanges, as well as leadership programs.

cooperation in the digital field. In particular, with regard to ICT infrastructure such as Open RAN and 5G, it was confirmed that Japan and the U.S. will identify priority countries to jointly engage with under a shared vision and will continue to hold discussions with the aim of expanding cooperation to promote inclusive Internet connectivity and build secure ICT infrastructure.

Along with the federal government, building closer ties with the unique individual states of the U.S. will help deepen Japan-U.S. economic ties at an even closer level. In 2024, the Japan-U.S. Business Conference, the Joint Meeting of the Japan-Midwest U.S. Association and the Midwest U.S.-Japan Association, and the Joint Meeting of the Southeast U.S.-Japan and Japan-U.S. Southeast Associations were held in person in the U.S. The governors of Texas and Idaho also visited Japan on separate occasions.

Moreover, in order to strengthen the foundation of Japan-U.S. economic relations from the grassroots level, the Government of Japan is also working as one on efforts to promote understanding of Japan. Since the launch of the Government Taskforce on Strengthening Japan-U.S. Ties at the Grass Roots Tour in 2017, the Government of Japan has undertaken efforts to build tailor-made relations in accordance with the characteristics of each region and the level of interest in Japan within the target regions. As an example, various initiatives have been implemented with the cooperation of various ministries and agencies, such as the "Grassroots Caravan" to disseminate the contributions of Japanese companies to regional economies, and projects related to supporting Japanese start-up companies in light of the "New Form of Capitalism" set forth by the Kishida Cabinet.

3 Canada

(1) Canada's Domestic Situation

The Trudeau administration had been running its government stably thanks to the "Supply and Confidence Agreement" with the New Democratic Party (NDP) concluded in March 2022, but in September, the NDP announced the termination of the agreement. The ruling Liberal Party suffered defeats in the Toronto by-election in June and the Montreal by-election in September and has since carried out multiple cabinet reshuffles. In November, the Trudeau administration

announced a temporary reduction of the goods and services tax and support measures for citizens to revive the government's sluggish approval ratings. In December, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland resigned, and the Trudeau administration embarked on another cabinet reshuffle, but in January 2025, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced his intention to resign as leader of the Liberal Party and as Prime Minister. On the economic front, according to the Department of Finance