

Why is There a Breach of Trust With the Puna Community?

Over the years since 1976, when the possibility of exploiting geothermal power first began, there have been increasing objections by residents in the affected area:

Industrialization of rural Hawaii was challenged by native Hawaiians, farmers, artists and environmentalists who felt their cultural connection with the aina was at stake.

Geothermal has caused earthquakes, land subsidence, and an eruption elsewhere, resulting in shutting down of wells. With Hawaii's highly unstable geology, if an earthquake were triggered, this could in turn cause an environmental disaster at the well.

In a shady land deal, some of the only remaining old-growth tropical rainforest in the US was sacrificed for geothermal use at the HGP-A well, which was later inundated by lava.

The Hawaii Geothermal Project-A (HGP-A) produced power to support experimental projects from 1982 to 1989, when Governor Waihee shut it down, in part because dangerous levels of hydrogen sulfide were being discharged into the community with continuous open venting.

Open pits held pools of toxic brine, which created an environmental problem with the surrounding community.

Puna Geothermal Venture (PGV) began operating near the same location. In 1990 and 1991, residents had to be evacuated because of uncontrolled open venting of toxic gasses, which were civil defense emergencies, and controlled venting of pollutants, which the company did in order to make repairs to their equipment, or due to malfunctions in their system.

In 1991 the well blew out, disgorging hydrogen sulfide and other chemicals for 31 hours, affecting people as far as 10 miles away and harming people within 5 miles. According to the Goddard and Goddard study, it could have been ten times worse, raising H₂S levels from 200 ppb at 5 km from the site, to a potential 2000 ppb, if the weather patterns had been less favorable. (Hydrogen sulfide has been shown to cause embryologic changes at 0.5 ppb.)

To date, there has been no health study of the effects.

The community won a lawsuit against PGV, which was the end of talk about expanding geothermal exploration... until now. The State has plans for a number of new geothermal wells, industrializing lower Puna, and supplying power to Oahu via undersea cable.

Since there is a breach of trust between the community, the geothermal developers, the state and county regulatory agencies, and the island's public electrical utility, what steps are necessary to rebuild this trust?

What will redeveloping community trust cost in terms of community engagement? Are such venues in place?

What will be the cost in mitigating financial, cultural, and religious impact?

If you wish to stay informed about community action and receive the Puna Pono Alliance Newsletter and Bob Petricci's Updates, email newsletter@punapono.com with NEWSLETTER in the subject line.

Puna Pono Alliance needs funds to keep up the fight for Puna. Please contribute by credit card or PayPal at punapono.com/contribute or by check to PO Box 492668, Keeaau, HI 96749.

If you want to help in other ways please call (808) 339-4344.