

TERM REPORT

Red Hill Water Crisis

Office of the Governor
State of Hawai'i



Red Hill Water Crisis

Overview

In 2019, the U.S. Navy applied for a five-year permit to operate the fuel tanks at Red Hill, which were installed during World War II. Following fuel releases that contaminated O'ahu's water sources in early 2020 and in 2021, the State Department of Health took a series of strict measures to hold the Navy accountable for the contamination.

The crisis is ongoing, and the state will continue to hold the Navy's feet to the fire to ensure the Red Hill tanks are safely defueled and closed.

Governor's Mission

Protect and more efficiently use our fresh water supply.

Commitments

"I appreciate the Navy's announcement that it has temporarily suspended its fuel operations at Red Hill. Hawaii's wellbeing and the safety of our residents, including military families, must come first. We cannot have national security without ensuring public health and safety. There are still really important questions that need to be answered, and the Order being issued by the Department of Health will help all parties get there. We are actively engaged in getting to the bottom of the issue as quickly as possible and as safely as possible."

Governor David Ige, News release, Dec. 6, 2021

"We are calling on the Navy to immediately suspend operations at Red Hill while they confront and remedy this crisis."

Governor David Ige, News release, Dec. 5, 2021

Progress & Milestones

"This is great news for the people of Hawai'i. Our national defense begins with the health and safety of our people, and there are better solutions for strategic fueling

today than there were when the Red Hill storage facility was built. We look forward to working with the Navy to safely defuel and permanently close the storage facility.”

Governor David Ige, News release, March 7, 2022

Accomplishments

[Navy drops lawsuit against Hawaii over defueling Red Hill](#), 4/23/22

“The U.S. Department of Justice has withdrawn its lawsuit filed in federal and state courts in February contesting the state’s emergency order instructing the Navy to drain its Red Hill fuel tanks.”

[Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Closure of the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility](#), 3/7/2022

“After close consultation with senior civilian and military leaders, I have decided to defuel and permanently close the Red Hill bulk fuel storage facility in Hawai‘i.”

Coverage/Timeline

From: <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/local-news/2021-12-21/confused-about-the-timeline-for-the-red-hill-fuel-storage-facility-and-contaminated-water-read-this>

April 7, 2022: U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [reiterates the Defense Department’s pledge](#) to defuel Red Hill, but does not give a timeline for doing so.

April 4, 2022: Navy [relieves Capt. Albert Lee Hornyak](#) as commanding officer of NAVSUP Fleet Logistics Center due to "a series of leadership and oversight failures" at Red Hill.

April 1, 2022: About 30 gallons of a "fuel and water mixture" leak during maintenance work to remove water from a fuel tank, the Navy says.

March 24, 2022: The estimated [cost of the Hawai‘i Department of Health’s response](#) from the beginning of the water crisis to June 30 will be approximately \$4.5 million, Deputy Environmental Health Director Kathleen Ho says.

March 18, 2022: Health officials say the tap water is safe to drink in [all residential areas served by the Navy's water system](#).

March 15, 2022: The Navy [will conduct a second investigation](#) into two fuel leaks at Red Hill after determining its first probe did not sufficiently review the situation, Hawai'i Public Radio has learned.

March 10, 2022: The Board of Water Supply [urges Aiea-Hālawā and Urban Honolulu residents](#) to reduce water use by 10% due to lower than normal rainfall and the continued shutdown of three key wells.

March 7, 2022: The U.S. Department of Defense says it will [permanently shut down Red Hill](#) and remove all the fuel. The military will now move to a more dispersed fueling system for ships and aircraft in the Indo-Pacific.

March 3, 2022: Health officials say tap water is safe for consumption in [three more zones](#) encompassing McGrew Point, Camp Smith, and part of the Aliamanu Military Reservation.

March 1, 2022: Health officials say the Navy is [not in compliance with the emergency order](#) to defuel because the third-party contractor selected to evaluate the facility "is not currently in a position to act independently."

Feb. 25, 2022: Navy officials say water testing has [detected a petroleum compound](#) at a level of 460 parts per billion in one Halsey Terrace home. The state Department of Health's limit is 211 parts per billion.

Feb. 24, 2022: The administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency visits Hawai'i. [An inspection starting Feb. 28](#) will look at whether the fuel tank facility was properly operated.

Feb. 23, 2022: The Honolulu City Council [unanimously approves a bill](#) that would require a city permit to operate large storage tanks like those at Red Hill.

Feb. 14, 2022: Health officials say water in [one Pearl Harbor neighborhood is safe](#) to drink — the first of 19 neighborhood zones.

Feb. 11, 2022: U.S. Reps. Ed Case and Kaiuli'i Kahele say [they are introducing legislation](#) to permanently shut down Red Hill. Kahele's office says U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz is introducing a companion bill in the Senate.

Feb. 7, 2022: Hawai'i members of Congress say [a spending bill includes \\$403 million](#) to address the crisis — with a portion of that for draining the fuel. [It passes](#) on Feb. 17 and President Joe Biden signs it a day later.

Feb. 4, 2022: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says it will [inspect Red Hill and assess its compliance](#) with regulations.

Feb. 2, 2022: Attorneys for the U.S. Navy [appeal Hawaii's order to drain the tanks](#), saying the state wrongly concluded the tanks posed an imminent threat that requires immediate action.

But in compliance with the emergency order, the Navy submits documents to the health department about assessing "facility operations and system integrity" to safely defuel the tanks.

Jan. 31, 2022: U.S. Department of Defense says it will [appeal the state order](#) to remove fuel from Red Hill, drawing criticism from Hawaii's congressional delegation, the health department and others.

Jan. 27, 2022: The Hawai'i Department of Health permits the Navy to [flush up to 5 million gallons of treated water a day](#) from its contaminated Red Hill Shaft into the Halawa Stream.

Jan. 25, 2022: Health officials say updated monitoring data from the Navy [shows increased levels of fuel](#) in soil vapor and groundwater in several areas around Red Hill.

A health department deputy director [probes the Navy to release](#) the results of an investigation into fuel leaks at Red Hill.

Jan. 18, 2022: The contract begins for engineering firm Simpson Gumpertz & Heger of Waltham, Massachusetts — [hired on](#) Jan. 11 for \$1.45 million — "to assess facility operations and system integrity" at Red Hill.

Jan. 13, 2022: A coalition of federal and local stakeholders [finalize the Navy's water flushing process](#).

Jan. 11, 2022: The Navy says it [will comply with Hawaii's order](#) to remove fuel from Red Hill, but does not dismiss the prospect of legal challenges.

Jan. 7, 2022: Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, issues an internal directive to "fully comply" with the Hawai'i Department of Health order.

Jan. 4, 2022: Federal public health officials begin [investigating the effects of contaminated water](#) on civilians.

Hawaii's congressional delegation [urges the Navy to comply with the state order](#) to drain fuel from the tanks.

Jan. 3, 2022: The Department of Health [upholds the state order](#) requiring the Navy to drain the Red Hill fuel tanks. Marian Tsuji, the department's deputy director, says she agrees with the conclusions of the hearings officer.

Dec. 29, 2021: In response to the state hearings officer, the Navy [files objections to the recommendation](#) that it should remove fuel from its storage facility.

Dec. 27, 2021: Calling the Red Hill facility "a metaphorical ticking timebomb," a state hearings officer [recommends the Navy should comply with the state order](#) that, among other things, requires the removal of millions of gallons of fuel.

Dec. 21, 2021: After a nearly 13-hour health department hearing, local officials, military representatives, and intervenors [present their closing arguments](#) on whether or not the Navy must defuel Red Hill.

During the hearing, a Navy official says [engineers have a "working theory" that the May fuel leak](#) — much bigger than first disclosed — may have migrated into the drinking water, causing this contamination.

Dec. 20, 2021: The Hawai'i Department of Health [begins the contested case hearing](#) for the emergency order issued to the Navy about removing fuel from the tanks and halting operations.

The Navy begins [filtering and flushing](#) its water system.

The Department of Defense Office of Inspector General [says it will investigate](#) "to determine the extent that Navy officials managed the operation, maintenance, safety, and oversight of the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, and protected the environment and drinking water systems, in compliance with Federal and state regulations and DoD policy."

Dec. 17, 2021: The U.S. Navy, U.S. Army, Environmental Protection Agency and state Department of Health announce the [creation of an interagency partnership](#) to ensure clean drinking water.

Dec. 16, 2021: Hawaii's [congressional delegation asks House and Senate leaders](#) to make sure the military spends whatever money it has available to address the contamination.

Dec. 15, 2021: The Honolulu City Council [approves the first reading](#) of a bill that would give the city oversight of large underground storage tanks such as those at the Red Hill facility. The council also passes a resolution calling for the permanent closure, defueling, and removal of the tanks.

Dec. 14, 2021: The Sierra Club of Hawai'i says it wants to [intervene in proceedings](#) for the state's emergency order against the Navy.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks [tours the facility](#) and meets with local officials.

Dec. 13, 2021: Navy [divers begin trying to remove jet fuel](#) from the Red Hill water shaft near Pearl Harbor.

Dec. 10, 2021: Water from the Navy's Red Hill shaft [contains high levels of gasoline and diesel fuel hydrocarbons](#), the Hawai'i Department of Health confirms. Hydrocarbons associated with diesel fuel were detected at 350 times the level the health department considers safe.

Dec. 8, 2021: The Department of Health reports diesel fuel levels are [more than double the limit](#) for drinking water in the Navy's 'Aiea-Halawa Shaft. The Navy says "the sample was not from the Halawa well but from an off-service section of the water distribution system." As a precaution, the Honolulu Board of Water Supply shuts down its 'Aiea and Halawa wells.

Dec. 7, 2021: The Navy [contests the health department's order](#) to further suspend the use of fuel tanks and drain them.

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro [directs the pause](#) of all operations at the Red Hill storage tanks until the investigation into the source of the petroleum leak is completed — but does not mention defueling the tank, as the emergency order directed.

Dec. 6, 2021: The Navy says [it suspended the use](#) of the storage tank facility on Nov. 27.

Gov. David Ige and the Department of Health [order the Navy](#) to further suspend operations until independent evaluators can ensure that appropriate actions are taken to protect drinking water. They also order the Navy to treat contaminated drinking water and plan to remove the fuel.

Dec. 5, 2021: Gov. David Ige and Hawaii's congressional delegation say that operations at the Red Hill fuel site [should be suspended immediately](#).

Rear Adm. Blake Converse [says at a town hall meeting](#) that a recent spill was likely the source of the contamination found in the well.

Dec. 3, 2021: The Honolulu Board of Water Supply [shuts down its Halawa Shaft](#) as a precaution. A [report released Dec. 13](#) by the BWS finds no contaminants in its Halawa Shaft.

The [Hawai'i congressional delegation urges Gov. David Ige](#) to request an emergency declaration from President Joe Biden.

The [U.S. Navy authorizes](#) evacuation and/or lodging allowances for residents in affected areas.

Dec. 2, 2021: The Navy says [tests have identified petroleum](#) in its Red Hill well. Rear Adm. Blake Converse, Pacific Fleet deputy commander, told a town hall meeting the Navy took this well offline on Nov. 28 because it was the closest well to affected housing areas. The source of contamination is not yet announced.

The [U.S. Army authorizes](#) evacuation and/or lodging allowances for residents in affected areas.

Dec. 1, 2021: Preliminary testing [shows the presence of petroleum product](#) in a water sample from Red Hill Elementary which is on the Navy water system, Hawai'i health officials say.

Nov. 30, 2021: The Navy [recommends Joint Base Pearl Harbor – Hickam military housing residents](#) avoid ingestion of their potable water as a cautionary measure "if chemical or petroleum odors are present."

Nov. 29, 2021: The U.S. Navy says it is investigating reports of a "chemical smell" in drinking water at some military homes. The [state Department of Health recommends](#) "all Navy water system users avoid using the water for drinking, cooking, or oral hygiene."

The Navy opens fire hydrants and illegally flushes [contaminated water directly onto sidewalks and residential streets](#), Honolulu Civil Beat reports.

Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, says he [ordered an investigation](#) into the Nov. 20 incident and reopened the investigation into the May 6 incident.

Nov. 28, 2021: Military residents begin complaining about gas or fuel odor from their drinking water. Some say they've been getting sick. The Navy says there is no "immediate indication" that [the water is unsafe](#).

The Navy takes its Red Hill water well offline but does not disclose that information until about Dec. 2. It remains isolated from the distribution system.

Nov. 27, 2021: The Navy [halts use](#) of the Red Hill storage tank facility but does not disclose that information until Dec. 6.

Nov. 24, 2021: Local [environmental groups call](#) for the federal government to close down the facility, saying they've had enough of the problems surrounding the storage tanks.

Nov. 20 - 21, 2021: The Navy initially reports [14,000 gallons of a fuel and water mix](#) leaked from a fire suppression drain line. The Navy said the drinking water was safe and there were no signs fuel escaped into the environment. In a January 2022 report, the Navy says "approximately 19,000 gallons of JP-5" leaked.

Oct. 27, 2021: The state [Department of Health fines the U.S. Navy](#) more than \$325,000 for operations and maintenance violations at Red Hill.

Oct. 26, 2021: The Sierra Club of Hawai'i [files a public records complaint](#) with the state Department of Health after learning of an email trail it believes could change the outcome of a contested case hearing for the Navy's permit to operate the Red Hill facility.

Oct. 8, 2021: [Honolulu Civil Beat reports](#) Navy officials knew the early 2020 Hotel Pier incident was due to an active fuel leak, "but officials waited months to report it to the department amid concerns it would hamper its ability to secure a state permit."

"It was the end of January, just days before the U.S. Navy was set to appear in a hearing before the Hawai'i Department of Health that would determine the fate of its Red Hill underground fuel facility," Civil Beat reporter Christina Jedra wrote.

May 6-7, 2021: A pipeline releases 1,618 gallons of fuel [due to operator error](#), the Navy says. Navy officials maintain the leak did not contaminate drinking water.

February 2021: The contested case hearing for the Navy's five-year permit takes place over several days.

Early 2020: An "oil sheen" is detected on surface water near Hotel Pier at Pearl Harbor. The military tells [Hawai'i Public Radio](#) about the fuel leak in June 2021 — something previously not disclosed. The Navy said about 7,700 gallons of fuel were collected from soil and water.

March-May 2019: The Navy submits to the health department an application, and revisions, for a five-year permit to operate Red Hill. In July 2019, the [department says it is reviewing](#) the case and has received requests for a contested case hearing, along with 156 public comments. The Sierra Club of Hawai'i and the Honolulu Board of Water Supply, which have continuously called for more oversight and/or closure, contested the permit.

May 2015: The Environmental Protection Agency and Hawai'i Department of Health negotiate with military officials to have more oversight on tank corrosion, release detection, inspections and maintenance.

Jan. 13, 2014: About 27,000 gallons of jet fuel leak from a tank at the Red Hill storage facility.

The Navy drained the tank and collected samples from existing monitoring wells. Results in and around the tank indicated a spike in levels of hydrocarbons in soil vapor and groundwater.

"I think what this really provides us an opportunity to do today is to respond to this particular spill, to get a good handle on what's happened in the past, and make sure nothing like this happens again," then-Deputy Health Director Gary Gill said.

The leak brought broader attention to the aging Red Hill facility and highlighted the threat to O'ahu's groundwater. Hundreds of thousands of O'ahu residents rely on a water aquifer 100 feet below the fuel storage facility for fresh drinking water. Gill said Red Hill has a history of contamination, some of which has worked its way down to the water table.

Looking Ahead

The Navy dismissed its appeal of the state's emergency order, but the contamination from multiple spills could have a lasting impact. For example, it's been reported that the [Navy water crisis could halt new construction on O'ahu](#).

The state will continue to execute its mission to safeguard public health by protecting Hawaii's drinking water sources from contamination and assure that owners and operators of public water systems provide safe drinking water to the community.