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Protecting the waters of Moanalua (underneath U.S. Navy's Pearl Harbor fuel storage tanks)

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Protesting the U.S. Navy's Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, where leaking tanks have contaminated the groundwater. Photo: Sierra Club of Hawai'i

The waters of what is now known as the Moanalua-Waimalu aquifer have long sustained the life of the plants, animals and people of the region.

Straddling the traditional boundary between the moku of Kona and 'Ewa, these waters have fed area streams and springs that supported ecosystems that our ancestors cared for and were fed by. The aquifer sits mauka of Ke Awalau o Pu'uloa (Pearl Harbor), an area once renowned for its bountiful seafood, like oysters (pipi) and awa (milkfish), as well as the sweet kākalo and 'awa — all made possible by abundant fresh water. These sacred waters were brought forth by the akua Kāne and Kanaloa in nearby Waimalu and Waiawa, their first stop in Hawai'i.

In 1940, just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy began constructing a massive fuel facility in Kapūkakī, or Red Hill, above the Moanalua-Waimalu aquifer.

It took three years and the lives of 16 workers to construct 20 massive, 250-foot tall tanks to hold 250 million gallons of petroleum fuel. Despite the high costs, the Navy got what it wanted: an underground, protected facility that could use gravity to deliver fuel to its warships in Pearl Harbor.

In 1948, an earthquake hit O‘ahu, spilling 1,100 barrels of fuel. Despite the Navy’s continuous efforts, chronic leaks would plague the facility for the next seven decades, resulting in at least 180,000 gallons of fuel spilling from these tanks over time.

As decades passed, concern grew as more people realized that these aging, leaky tanks were located just 100 feet above what had now become the principal water source for hundreds of thousands of residents in urban Honolulu, from Hālawa to Maunaloa.

In 2014, the Navy reported a massive release of 27,000 gallons of fuel from one of the Red Hill tanks, which had just been inspected. The Navy struck a deal with regulators to, among other things, assess the risk of future releases – a deal which seven years later it has yet to fulfill.

In 2019, the Sierra Club of Hawai‘i, which had previously sued to require the Navy to obtain a state underground storage tank permit for the Red Hill facility, filed a legal challenge to the Navy’s permit application. The Honolulu Board of Water Supply, having expressed its own concerns for years, also joined in this “contested case hearing.”

The facts and evidence highlighted in the contested case hearing revealed that the

Red Hill facility may be the biggest imminent threat to the aquifer that has been a foundation of life as we know it on O‘ahu, from time immemorial to the present day:

- Eight of the tanks, each containing millions of gallons of fuel, have not been inspected in over two decades; three of these have not been inspected in 38 years;
- Leaked fuel and fuel components have already been found in the groundwater below the facility;
- The thin steel tank walls are corroding faster than the Navy anticipated due to moisture in the gaps between the tanks and their concrete casing;
- The Navy’s system to test and monitor tanks for leaks cannot detect slow leaks that may indicate a heightened risk for larger, catastrophic leaks; cannot prevent human error that has led to large releases of fuel in the past; and cannot prevent an earthquake, like the one that spilled 1,100 barrels of fuel when the tanks were brand new.

Recent news regarding whistleblower e-mails has also indicated that Navy officials withheld important information during the contested case hearing, such as the existence of holes, active leaks from attached pipelines, and other potential vulnerabilities. And most recently, the Department of Health fined the Navy \$325,000 after a routine facility inspection found multiple regulatory violations.

The Navy cannot be trusted with the sacred water that sits a mere 100 feet below these massive fuel tanks. We owe it to the many generations who cared for this resource before us to protect this aquifer so that life can continue to thrive here for generations to come.

Freshwater is life-giving not only as a physical element but through its spiritual significance in frequent ritual invocation and offering. The last stanza of the well-known pule “Aia i hea ka Wai a Kāne?” reminds us that the freshwater, buried deep in the earth, is sacred to Kāne and Kanaloa and calls on us to protect these waters

essential to life itself.

*Aia i hea ka wai a Kane?
Aia i lalo, i ka honua, i ka wai hu
I ka wai kau a Kane me Kanaloa
He waipuna, he wai e inu
He wai e mana, he wai e ola
E ola no, ea! Aia i laila ka wai a Kane!*

*Where is the water of Kāne?
It'S below, in the earth, in the water that gushes forth,
In the water placed by Kāne and Kanaloa
Spring water, water to drink
Water that imbues mana, water that imbues life
Life! There is the water of Kāne!*

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Source: [Ka Wai Ola](#)

