

MAUI COUNTY

What's happening to Honolua Stream?

A crucial contributor to Honolua Bay's health, the stream is drying up. Some blame ML&P, but could the problem be much larger?

By Jared Libby

Most Maui residents are aware of the battle raging over Honolua Bay and Lipoa Point. In April Maui Land and Pineapple Co. (ML&P) rolled out its development plans: 40-something homes on the Mauka side of the Pi'ilani Highway, a new golf course overlooking the bay and—to sweeten the deal—a new surf park and facilities for residents and visitors. Their efforts were met by a huge public outcry prompting ML&P to take its plans off the table indefinitely.



The diversion grate where Honolua Stream's entire contents plunge into a retention pool, then into a 4-inch PVC pipe.

Caught in the middle of this dispute like some poor neglected stepchild is Honolua Stream. At one time the stream flowed year-round, bringing rainwater from the West Maui Mountains through the valley and into the bay.

But these days the stream is a series of stagnant, mosquito-breeding pools, where the water flows into the bay only through underground channels or during heavy rain. For Elle Cochran, president of the Save Honolua Coalition, restoring the stream's natural flow is pivotal for preserving Honolua's fragile ecosystem.

"It's one of the most urgent issues we're facing," Cochran said. "Restoring stream flow will only help propagate aquatic life and preserve the coral reef."

The coalition claims on its website (savehonolua.org) that the stream is "rerouted to service golf courses, resorts, and areas as far away as Lahaina." But Maui Land & Pine denies taking water from the stream.

"We are not diverting water from Honolua Stream," Kalani Schmidt of ML&P's Community Development Division said. Pineapple production on and around Lipoa Point ceased in 2001 and, according to Schmidt, the company has not taken water from Honolua Stream since 2004. Except for "a brief period last summer during an extreme drought," Schmidt added.

In an effort to get to the bottom of the mystery of the disappearing stream, I

hitched a ride with Schmidt to check out the situation. Turning quickly off the highway we passed several large homes under construction, part of the new Honolua Ridge development. Passing through a locked gate, we traversed a nauseatingly bumpy dirt road through a series of several more locked gates.

After the ride we came upon a pair of Indiana Jones-style swinging bridges. We crossed cautiously, being sure to distribute our weight evenly across the span. A short walk from there and we came upon the stream.

Around the 800-foot elevation, a manmade ditch bisects the stream. Built in 1903 to bring water from Pu‘u Kukui (one of the wettest spots on Earth) to Mahinahina, Honolua Ditch—which flows through mountains and deep gulches—is a feat of engineering genius by any standard. Schmidt said the rainwater then continues on into West Maui where it’s used for agriculture, irrigation and drinking water.

“This was quite the undertaking,” Schmidt added. “It’s amazing it even exists.”

At the intersection the stream flows into a large concrete and steel grate, into a concealed housing, then out into a deep concrete retaining pool and into a four-inch PVC pipe. The pipe then brings the water over the ditch and back into the streambed a few hundred feet downstream.

“If that’s not a diversion, I don’t know what else to call it,” Cochran said.

Once again, Schmidt denied claims that ML&P is taking water from Honolua.

“All water that goes through the grate goes back into the stream,” Schmidt said. “But [we] do run water through the system to keep it operational.”

Schmidt argues there is simply not as much rainwater coming through the stream as in past years. “People say they remember the when the stream used to flow all year, but that was when it was being diverted,” she said.

Archeological evidence of over 140 ancient Lo‘i in Honolua Valley indicates much more water must have flowed through the gulch in the past. Some could see this as proof that the last 100-years of diverting water have taken a toll on the stream. But it could also point to a larger, even more alarming trend of less and less rainfall in the West Maui Mountains.

Data collected by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) does suggest a decrease in rainfall at Pu‘u Kukui as well as a decreased stream flow in nearby Honokohau. Though no data is provided for Honolua Stream, the study does show rain an increase in other areas of the West Mauiis.

Cochran said the USGS study does not account for the change in the stream’s condition. “There’s still rain up there,” she said. “If there’s rain [the stream]

should be flowing.”

Regardless of the reason, Honolua Stream isn't doing well. A video posted on Savehonolua.org shows the stream miraculously bubbling back to life after heavy rains in the valley above. And about the only thing Save Honolua and ML&P seem to agree on is that it's likely to get worse. **MTW**