



# AIR CANADA

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## Behind the scenes: How Air Canada responded to help get Canadians home after devastating Maui wildfires



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Air Canada has flown over one thousand Canadians home safely from Maui over several days following the devastating wildfires on the Hawaiian island.

When the deadly fires affected Maui on August 8, the access road to Kahului Airport was closed, which necessitated the cancellation of Air Canada's normally scheduled flight to Vancouver that evening. The following day, the sobering news of Lahaina's terrible destruction and evacuation became widely known.

Air Canada's global operations nerve centre located near Toronto, Ontario, known as System Operations Control (SOC), which manages and tracks the airline's worldwide operations 24/7, immediately began putting together a team to focus on the Maui operation.

### **Analysis of global operation, fleet, demand requirements**

With SOC quarterbacking plans and assessing how best to operate in a rapidly changing environment to get people home, the team evaluated operational constraints, outlooked the demand for seats departing Maui, considered how to balance the overall operation during the busy summer travel season and also handle the Maui crisis.

"Being in the summer peak, our fleet was fully committed to our scheduled flying operations. With no hotel accommodations available for crew rest due to the devastation, we would not be able to operate our usual scheduled aircraft, a narrow-body Boeing 737MAX. However, Air Canada's large and diverse fleet gave us options to look at double-crewing a wide-body aircraft which has rest facilities onboard, to have one crew operate down with the second crew resting, and the reverse on the way back, and also bring back twice as many people on a flight," said Neale Wisniewski, Director – System Operations Control.

"We knew it was important to get passengers home as quickly as possible with the awful situation. After evaluating various options which included tech stops in Honolulu to change crew using smaller 737s and other scenarios, we decided to substitute a narrow body aircraft to one of our YVR-Toronto rotations and assign a wide-body aircraft for the immediate lift needed in Maui over three days," continued Neale.



### **Comprehensive plan involves cross functional teams across airline**

Within 24 hours, the plan was finalized and implemented, and a call was held with the various operational teams to get that night's flight immediately onto a larger 298-seat Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner, which would provide extra capacity to bring back more passengers.

Coordination across all of Air Canada's operational branches - from crew scheduling, contract centres, catering, security, ground handling and more - was key so that everything worked as smoothly as possible. That included loading extra fuel in case facilities in Maui were compromised, assigning extra pilots to ensure maximum flexibility and sending a maintenance engineer as part of the crew to sign-off the aircraft in Maui.

With local authorities requesting that visitors not come to Maui due to evacuations, Air Canada cancelled its outbound flights to Maui to operate a ferry flight, meaning the flight would operate down with no passengers onboard. The flights would return as scheduled flights on a wide-body, to bring back as many passengers as possible.

### **Dynamic and evolving situation**

Karen Park, Air Canada's Manager for Customer Service in Hawaii, liaised with the local authorities, other airlines, our ground handling team, the SOC team as well as helping passengers. The largest natural disaster in the state's history meant that it was a dynamic, evolving situation for several days.

"There were so many people at the airport, the roads to the airport were affected, power and communications were down for many parts of the island. We had a crew on layover who we were able to communicate with only sporadically and who we could not get to the airport," recalled Karen.

"Customers who evacuated from Lahaina were telling us that it was really scary. People did not have time to get their passports and other items as they fled the danger. Because SOC was able to firm up plans so quickly to have the Dreamliner come down that night, it was a great relief as I could focus on telling the passengers what to expect and work with the authorities to handle identification procedures and other matters.

### **First special Dreamliner flight arrives within 24 hours**

"When the Dreamliner arrived that night, I was so touched when I saw the Air Canada crew as they were ready to go and got us to board as soon as possible. They asked us about our teams' and our families' safety and provided us with warm words. Our customers were very relieved to board the aircraft, and I was moved by their words of appreciation," said Karen.

Captain Edwin Olson operated two of the Dreamliner rescue flights. "We all saw the horrible news coming out about Maui, and when the call came about the rescue flights, my reaction was 'this is a no brainer, count me in, we're doing this.' As a pilot, our focus is let's just get the job done. Keep an eye on safety and ensure safe operations. We saw smoke as we departed Maui, and we saw pots of fires on the island.

"At cruise altitude, I was able to go back and speak to a few passengers. They described some pretty scary scenes and were so thankful to be onboard. I am just so proud of our efforts in getting people out," concluded Captain Olson.

Cynthia Paquette is a Service Director who operated one of the Maui rescue flights. "We welcomed the passengers onboard and they were visibly relieved. We heard stories of how helpless some people felt, being unable to help displaced people in the immediate aftermath notwithstanding their own escape. Others told us how they tried to leave Lahaina going north to no avail. What struck me most was the emotion and sheer humanity of how everyone was looking out for each other on the flight."

### **Outlooking day by day**

Air Canada continued a double crew operation with the Dreamliner for three days, departing as ferry flights and returning from Maui full with passengers each time. A goodwill travel policy was in place, and with a larger aircraft departing Maui, the additional seats were made available to people who wanted to depart Maui earlier.

The SOC team evaluated the ground situation with Karen who was continually liaising with local authorities and outlooking the numbers of passengers still needing to return to Canada. A plan was finalized to resume flights with the normally scheduled 169-seat Boeing 737 MAX on Aug. 12 after crew accommodations were secured in an unaffected part of the island and following confirmation the larger aircraft capacity was no longer required.

### **Teamwork, dedication and commitment**

“Looking at the devastating footage, pictures in the news, hearing the incredibly brave stories from passengers who were evacuated or had to get themselves to safety under extreme circumstances, as well as accounts from our US team on the ground helping passengers, we are tremendously moved by our passengers’ deep response to our efforts getting them home safely and as quickly as possible. With our diverse fleet and our global expertise, we were able to implement a comprehensive response plan to this unimaginable disaster effectively thanks to the commitment, dedication and professionalism of Air Canada’s employees, both customer facing and behind the scenes,” concluded Neale.

### Travelling to/from Maui

Air Canada has in place a [flexible goodwill policy](#) for passengers to change or cancel their flights to Maui. Options include changing flights from Maui to Honolulu, changing Maui flights to a future date, or cancelling Maui flights for an Air Canada travel voucher which can be applied to other destinations, or a refund to their original form of payment on request. Air Canada will continue to review, modify or extend the goodwill policy as required.

The Air Canada Foundation is liaising with aid partners to determine any assistance the Foundation can support.

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

