

LAVA ROAD

After 10 months, Kapoho residents can drive into their isolated neighborhood



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Triana Pardon has been living in her family's home in the lava-bound Kapoho subdivision with her boyfriend since February. Before the new road opened on April 1, "We had to hike in 10 to 15 minutes over the lava, very sharp rock with hot spots underneath," she said.

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KAPOHO >> Across the pitch-black volcanic landscape, studded with skeletal trees, stretches a hardened lava river approximately 150 yards wide. Last May and June it flowed red as a gushing artery for 8 to 9 miles from fissure 8 in Leilani Estates to the ocean.

Its surface is now a jagged obstacle course of cracks, ridges, peaks, valleys and chunky lava bergs.

The eruption in Kilauea's lower East Rift Zone turned Halekamahina and neighboring subdivisions in Lower Puna on the Big Island into a kipuka, or area surrounded by lava, cut off from any roads.

That changed April 1 when a new access road opened after workers from Puna Geothermal Venture, the power plant shut down by the lava flow, carved a byway across the channel.

A NEW ROAD HOME

Puna Geothermal Venture constructed a new access road across the lava flow and connected it to a road inside the lava-surrounded Halekamahina subdivision so that residents could drive to their homes.

4/20/2019



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Please see KAPOHO, A8



KAPOHO

Continued from A1

While much easier than walking in, it's still a rocky ride.

Jolting along it Wednesday in a company truck driven by Jordan Hara, PGV plant manager, it was hard to imagine that until April 1, residents had to hike over this forbidding ground.

"The road is only available to residents and their immediate family so they can go back to their (properties) in the kipuka," said Mike Kaleikini, senior director of Hawaii affairs for PGV. Entry is restricted to registered permittees through a checkpoint at PGV's facility that's staffed 24/7.

Kaleikini said the PGV-bulldozed road connects to an internal subdivision road, adding that permission to drive within the neighborhood is also needed from Kapoho Land & Development Co. Ltd., the subdivisions' developer and owner of the roads in the kipuka.

As the truck drove past a few of the 50-odd houses in the kipuka that survived the eruption, Lono Lyman, manager of Kapoho Land Partnership, came driving up with his wife, Nancy Peacock. It was his second visit to check on his farmer lessees since the road had opened, Lyman said.

While the eruption, which destroyed more than 700 homes throughout the region, was horrible, he said,

A road bulldozed by Puna Geothermal Venture through the lava field in Kapoho opened April 1 for residents to access their properties. Pictured above, Lono Lyman, manager of Kapoho Land Partnership, used the road Wednesday to check on his farmer lessees. Pictured at top is the new road leading toward Puna Geothermal Venture.

"It's one of the ironies that the (lava-ignited) brush fires enhanced the landscape," killing ground nematodes and clearing more land for cultivation.

"It lifts my spirit," Lyman said, recounting how one farm family had returned before the road opened, their children hiking in and out to go school. "I'm humbled by how grateful they are to be able to get in, get back to their homes," he said of the more than 100 people on PGV's approved entry list.

The kipuka road joined Highway 132, which soon came to a dead end at an extensive pile of lava that had filled Green Lake, once the largest natural freshwater lake in the Hawaiian islands.

A new resident, Triana Pardon, stopped her car to give an interview. "The lava stopped maybe 50 yards away from the house; they lost some acreage," said Pardon, who moved from Los Angeles in February to house-sit her family home with her boyfriend.

Before April 1, "We had to hike in 10 to 15 minutes over the lava, very sharp rock with hot spots underneath," she said. "When it was pouring rain the past couple days, the lava field was really going off with steam."

Weather and visibility permitting, entry is allowed daily from 8 to 11 a.m. and 4 to 7 p.m., and one can exit anytime, Kaleikini said. Liability waiver/permission forms are available at PGV's checkpoint.