

The Pacific

Nuclear Descendants In Hawaii Are Incensed By Blown Bikini Atoll Reparation Funds

The council spent money on two ships, vehicles, an airplane and a block of land near Hilo.



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By Thomas Heaton   / June 21, 2023

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Gibson Maddison has received regular payments for most of his life, from a trust created by the U.S. as reparations for the nuclear testing program it conducted on his ancestral homeland, Bikini Atoll.

No payments have come this year though, leaving the 48-year-old and Hawaii's wider Bikinian community [outraged with the council they accuse of mismanaging the trust](#).

The Kili Bikini Ejit Resettlement Trust Fund was worth \$59 million in 2017 when the U.S. handed over control to the Kili Bikini Ejit Council and its withdrawal limit was removed. The trust was effectively an operating budget for the council.

Now there is just \$100,000 left.

And quarterly payments of approximately \$115 to all Bikinians from a second trust, known as the Bikini Claims Fund, have also stopped.



Bikinian Gibson Maddison, who has lived in Hawaii for 29 years, is livid that the trust monies have dried up and compromised the security of his people in the U.S. and Marshall Islands. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2023)

Maddison says the Bikinian community in Hawaii is reeling without the payments that helped cover everything from medical insurance and rent to school supplies.

Maddison's elderly mother has had to return to work and the Bikinian community has recently taken to fundraising for their children's graduations, which they typically covered with their trust fund payments.

"They never did that because they had money from back home," Maddison said.

The reality for those still in the Marshall Islands is more stark because even small amounts from the trust kept the community afloat, helping to cover rent and food for a population that now predominantly lives on Kili island and Ejit atoll.

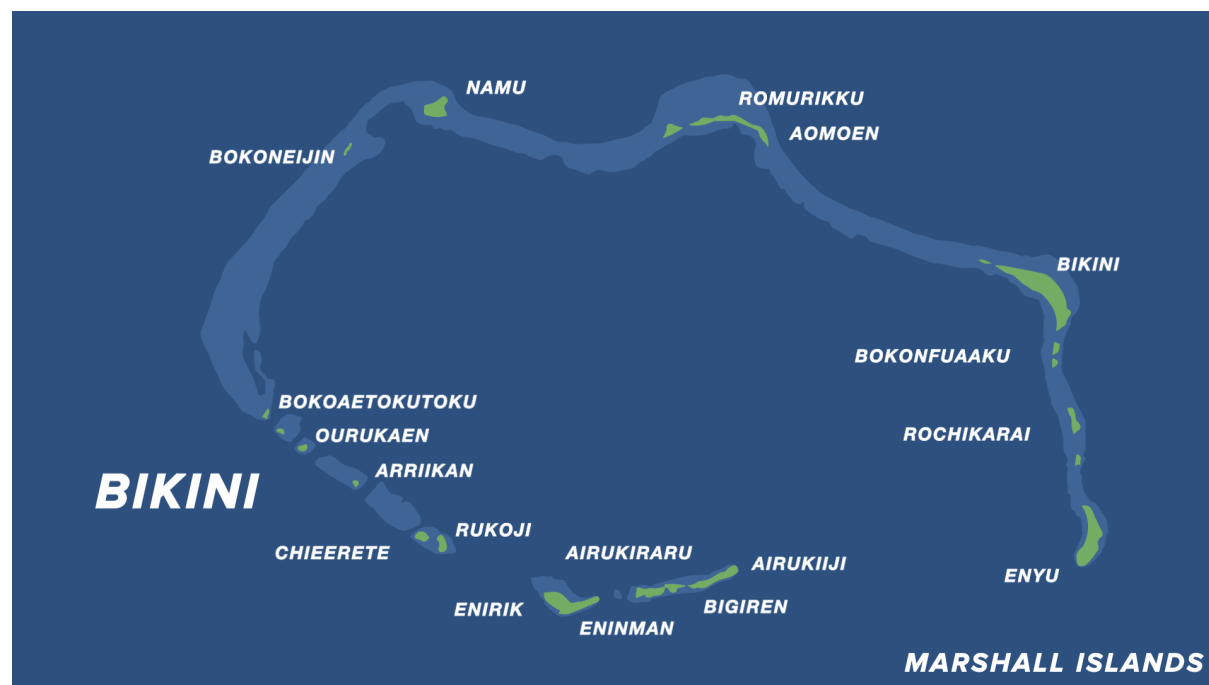
“We work. But we know that the Bikinians at home are the ones that are going to suffer,” Maddison said.

The enduring effects include many Bikinians defaulting on loans guaranteed by the funds that the council once dispersed.

Lani Kramer, who was once KBE Council’s trust liaison officer, lives in the capital and has sent food to her sister’s family on Kili to help fill the funding gap.

Her brother-in-law, who works at the island’s power station, has not been paid in six months and neither have 350 other council employees.

Kramer says he keeps working because otherwise the island would lose electricity.



The lack of payments from the fund has led Bikinians to default on loans that were guaranteed by the trust fund. (April Estrellon/Civil Beat/2023)

A Total Loss of Trust

The U.S. set up two trust funds in the 1980s as a reparations package for the Bikinian community, one to help resettle them and clean up Bikini Atoll and another to provide payments directly to community members.

The claims trust fund is still controlled by independent trustees but the resettlement trust, which has been used to support the displaced community, was administered by the U.S. government.

That was until 2017, when Bikinian leaders convinced the U.S. government to relinquish control. Subsequent problematic council purchases quickly burned through the fund.

Those included two ships, an airplane, a fleet of vehicles, a Majuro apartment complex and a 283-acre plot of land in Hilo.



The Kili Bikini Ejit Council used \$4.8 million from The Bikini Resettlement Trust Fund to purchase this 283 acres near Hilo on Hawaii island. (Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2023)


And while those investments might account for several million dollars, Bikinians question where the rest of the money went.

Several protests have taken place at Bikini's council building, national parliament and the U.S. Embassy.

"We hardly protest in the Marshall Islands but we just don't know what else to do," Kramer said in an interview.

The community wants answers from the U.S. too, because it told the council it could have control of the fund but had to deliver annual reports to the Department of Interior. They never came.

Protesters want the council to be placed into receivership, which they hope will enable a full accounting of how in particular Mayor Anderson Jibas and council attorney Gordon Benjamin spent the fund.



“Basically they’re going to have to fend for themselves. I doubt they’re going to get additional monies.”

Former Department of Interior Assistant Secretary Esther Kiaaina

The Marshall Islands government has been slow to respond, deferring receivership earlier this year.

Everything has left the community feeling helpless, according to Kramer. Many pin their hopes on the next council election in November, in which Kramer will likely run for mayor.

Financial management was a concern even before the Department of Interior relinquished oversight, according to Honolulu City Council member Esther Kiaaina, who worked for the DOI during the Obama administration.

As assistant secretary for insular areas, Kiaaina raised concerns over the “bloated” local government’s unsustainable spending and lack of foresight. She says she encouraged the council to buy land in Hawaii as a climate change refuge, because of the impact of rising sea levels on the Marshall Islands.

Jack Niedenthal, who worked as the trust liaison officer for 30 years, until 2016, warned Congress that the fund was “[in danger of disappearing](#)” in early 2018.



The Bikini Atoll nuclear test, Castle Bravo, and other tests run from 1946 to 1958 resulted in reparations for Bikinians. (Wikimedia Commons)

“And that’s exactly what’s happened,” Niedenthal said.

Kiaaina says that the U.S. government is partly responsible for this situation, given that during the Obama administration there were already signs that the council was withdrawing unsustainable amounts.

Now the trust fund is virtually empty the community [can go back to Congress to ask for more help](#). But it’s unlikely they will get anything, Kiaaina says.

“I care deeply about what happened to the Bikinians and I care about their welfare,” Kiaaina said in an interview. “Basically they’re going to have to fend for themselves. I doubt they’re going to get additional monies.”

Meanwhile the U.S. is [continuing negotiations with the Marshall Islands for its Compact of Free Association](#), an agreement that saw it contribute \$998 million to the Pacific nation between 2004 and 2023.

And the council's behavior may taint the negotiation, according to Niedenthal.

[“It's going to impact not just the nuclear affected atolls,”](#) Niedenthal said. “I think it's going to impact the whole country when it comes to accountability and what the U.S. is going to do with the money they give to the (Marshall Islands) because of what these guys did.”

Ringo Lewis has lived off his quarterly payments since being fired from his council job in 2016, which he believes came from questioning its spending.

He has continued to raise questions, writing in to the local newspaper, The Marshall Islands Journal.

Now in Hawaii with his wife, staying with his children's families, he does not know if he can afford to return to the Marshall Islands to live without the trust stipend.

His daughter Wisa says his message is simple: “He wants everyone to know that Bikinians are in need of help. He wants everyone to know that the trust fund is in need of help.”

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