

Maui truthers are so dumb they're using a Falcon 9 photo as wildfire evidence

Enlarge / Typically a marine layer shrouds launches from here in fog or clouds.

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I noticed an uptick in traffic to an old SpaceX news article a few days ago. First, a few dozen visitors. Then, a few hundred. And today, thousands. What the heck?

The article itself is *extremely* lackluster. It was an excuse to run a photo gallery depicting a Falcon 9 launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base, as it was then known, in May 2018. This Iridium NEXT-6 mission launched five communications satellites for the private company Iridium and a small NASA satellite. About the only thing notable about this mission is that the first-stage booster was reused from the mysteriously lost Zuma launch a few months earlier. Anyway, the California liftoff looked super cool because it was a rare launch from Vandenberg amid clear skies.

All told, the article was maybe 100 words and a dozen photos. However, one of them, the second photo in the gallery, was a long-exposure “streak shot” that showed the pillar of flame beneath the rocket’s ascent. That photo appears at the top of this article. It’s a beautiful picture. In casual conversation a few months later, the SpaceX photographer who took the shot thanked me for sharing it.

And that was the end of it for more than five years—until the tragic and devastating outbreak of wildfires on the Hawaiian island of Maui in early August.

The precise causes of the wildfires are complex and likely intertwined with climate change, but in the big picture, they involved drought conditions in the area and strong high pressure to the north of the islands that produced very gusty winds. Once the wildfires sparked on Maui, near Lahaina, they spread quickly. The result has been at least 99 confirmed deaths, with many hundreds more missing.

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But for some people, that explanation is too convenient. Isn't Hawaii supposed to be this lush, green paradise? So, as is often the case with major news stories in the United States and around the world, conspiracy theory vultures began spewing outrageous ideas in the immediate aftermath. One example is this video, which appeared on Rumble, and attributed the wildfires to a "directed energy weapon." Yes, space lasers did this, according to the Maui wildfire truthers.

Now, directed energy weapons are a real thing. The US Navy uses high-energy lasers to emit photons that can produce measurable physical damage. But there is no powerful capability like this in space, let alone something that could damage or destroy targets on Earth. To believe this is the case, one would have to fundamentally misunderstand the power needs in space for such a weapon and the power capabilities of existing satellites today.

Enlarge / Truth Social doing what “Truth” Social does.

Truth Social screenshot

So where’s the evidence for such a grand claim? According to the Maui truthers, it can be found in the aforementioned Falcon 9 launch photo from May 2018. The lovely Falcon 9

streak photo has been used on Facebook, Reddit, Truth Social, and certainly other dens of conspiracy theories to purportedly show a directed energy weapon in action, blasting a target on the surface of Earth.

This is, of course, complete nonsense. If you live in reality, that is.

While digging into the rabbit hole of conspiracy theorists and directed energy weapons, I discovered that they are often conflated with the High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) and the government's control of the weather. I do not recommend that rabbit hole, by the way.

If you've made it this far, you're probably a pretty decent person. In that case, you might want to think about sharing some Aloha with the people of Maui. I would recommend the Maui Food Bank or the Hawai'i Community Foundation. Both are reputable, local charities in the best position to deliver immediate aid to those in need.

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