



Top News

Lawmaker wants to hold state elections officer accountable

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Rep. Joy San Buenaventura, a Democrat from Puna, talks about a bill she introduced that would require performance evaluations for the state's chief elections officer at the Hawaii Legislature on Friday.

A lawmaker from the Big Island wants to hold state Chief Elections Officer Scott Nago accountable for voting problems that she says denied residents of her district the right to vote.

Tropical Storm Iselle hit Hawaii's Big Island a few days before Hawaii's primary election last year, felling hundreds of trees and knocking out power to thousands of residents.

Voting was postponed in two precincts. But some residents in the precincts where the polls were open had blocked driveways or were too busy struggling without power or water to vote.

A makeup election was called, but many Puna residents weren't sure who could participate, and the instructions were changed with just a few days' notice, said Rep. Joy San Buenaventura, a Big Island Democrat.

"They felt really disenfranchised," San Buenaventura said. "They felt that their vote didn't count. Hundreds of them were prevented after Iselle from physically going to the voting booth, and when they tried to vote in the makeup election, they were denied."

During that same election, hundreds of Maui voters' absentee ballots were lost and then found.

Issues arose again during the general election, when lava from an active volcano was bearing down on Puna, and residents got what they felt were confusing instructions about how to vote, San Buenaventura said.

"The people of Puna wanted Scott Nago fired," San Buenaventura said.

That didn't happen, so San Buenaventura introduced a bill that seeks to limit the term of the state's chief election officer to two years and to require performance evaluations after elections. The bill was heard in the House Judiciary Committee on Friday.

Nago was at the hearing to testify on other bills, but he told The Associated Press that he had no comment and isn't taking a position on San Buenaventura's bill.

The proposal to limit the term to two years was unpopular, and Janet Mason of the League of Women Voters told the committee that an elections officer needs more than two years in office to be effective.

"We agree that there definitely should be a periodic review ... and that's not happening right now," Mason said.

Clerks from Hawaii County and Maui County opposed the bill in written testimony, saying the officer's term should remain four years because of the steep learning curve to run statewide elections and the need for stability. Kauai County Clerk Ricky Watanabe agreed and wrote that if anything, the state should extend the term to six years.

Common Cause Hawaii asked the committee to amend the bill to give the Elections Commission explicit authority to remove the chief elections officer based on unsatisfactory performance.

"My goal is to make the chief elections officer accountable to somebody," San

Buenaventura said.