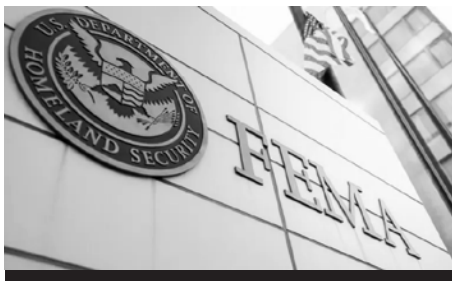
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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES VOL. 58, NO. 8 MAY 18, 2026

San Diego County addresses growing gaps in arts funding

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

San Diego County, Calif. is investing millions of dollars into arts and culture programming for diverse and underserved communities.

The county funding comes as the city of San Diego prepares to slash $11.8 million in arts and culture grants. The county initiative has been in the works for roughly a year, so it's not a direct response to the proposed city cuts but is instead an overdue recognition of how essential the arts are to creating a thriving community, said San Diego County Supervisor Monica Montgomery Steppe.

"In our arts and culture community, there has always been a lack of investment," Montgomery Steppe said. "I think the community has not been recognized for what it actually contributes to our region, as far as being connected to mental health services, creating economic drivers, so we're really taking a broader and more holistic approach."

On May 6, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors approved up to $2.75 million in total funding, with $2.25 million in ongoing annual investments, for arts and culture programming. Some of the funding will go directly to local artists and expanding access to affordable creative spaces, such as county-owned properties for public arts programming.

Investing in arts and culture "strengthens neighborhoods and provides safe and meaningful community spaces," Montgomery Steppe said. "These are things that we can see being erased and removed from our communities, and I think the arts and culture community brings all of these important facets of our neighborhoods together."

San Diego Black Arts and Culture District, which encompasses nine blocks within the community of Encanto, is receiving a one-time funding allocation of $500,000 through the initiative. In 2022, Montgomery Steppe led San Diego City Council's vote to approve the establishment of the Black Arts and Culture District.

The funding will go toward building a community space for workshops, youth programs, speakers and more events centered around arts and culture, according to Denise Rogers, a San Diego Mesa College art history professor who is a member of the San Diego Black Arts and Culture District committee. The decision came from community input on how an influx of

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WIR second vice president Ned Coe, first vice president Derrick DeGroot, president Dwayne McFall and immediate past president John Peters mark a new year for the Western Interstate Region. Coe is a Modoc County, Calif. supervisor, DeGroot is a Klamath County, Ore. commissioner, McFall is a Fremont County, Colo. commissioner and Peters is a Mono Coutny, Calif. supervisor. Photo by Charlie Ban

WIR meeting focuses on disaster recovery following Maui wildfire

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

WIR isn't just PILT and SRS, and that's A-OK. This year, programming for the Western Interstate Region (WIR) Conference focused on an existential threat faced by western counties — disasters.

Against the backdrop of the Lahaina wildfires, WIR drew its largest ever attendance to Maui County, Hawai'i May 5-8 — nearly 700 registrants. Officials from different parts of Maui County's government shared their perspective on the August 2023 wildfires, offering practical insights that county leaders could take home to refine their disaster mitigation, response and recovery operations. That brought visitors to a region fueled by tourism.

"I am absolutely convinced

See WIR page 4

One Florida county's answer to honoring America's unclaimed deceased indigents

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Each year in the United States, nearly 150,000 people die without being claimed by family or loved ones. Families either can't afford to lay a loved one to rest or no one is available to claim the body. As a result, the responsibility for laying an indigent person to rest is passed to county governments. The process varies by county, but the unclaimed are often cremated or buried in a mass grave system, unmarked, with no funeral service.

While death is inevitable, receiving a proper burial is not. One of the counties around the country working to change that is Okaloosa County, Fla. Every Nov. 2, in commemoration of All Souls' Day and the Day of the Dead, over 150 people gather to celebrate the lives of the unclaimed in Okaloosa County's Beal Memorial Cemetery.

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Maui County set up recovery office, expedited services for fire effort

From WIR page 1

that our commitment to a community-led recovery, and our relentless pursuit to move from response to readiness has helped guide us through one of the most difficult chapters Maui County has ever faced," said Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen, Jr. "It is our hope that by sharing our experiences, challenges and lessons learned, we may help others by offering guidance, support and perhaps even a small measure of hope to other communities facing similar hardships."

WIR assembles counties from the 17 westernmost states, usually to discuss issues central to communities with significant portions of publicly owned land, including federal funding, disaster response, natural resources, tourism and land stewardship.

Maui County last played host to NACo's Annual Conference in 2005, and the WIR Conference came to Kauai County 10 years later.

The region's membership elected Fremont County, Colo. Commissioner Dwayne McFall as its new president, with Klamath County, Ore. Commissioner Derrick DeGroot serving as first vice president and Modoc County, Calif. Supervisor Ned Coe running unopposed for second vice president. Immediate Past President John Peters, a Mono County, Calif. supervisor, closed out 17 months as WIR president, including filling the remainder of Wes McCart's term after he left the Stevens County, Wash. Board of Commissioners.

The 2027 WIR Conference will be held in Douglas County, Nev.



Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawai'i) extols the virtues of mitigation efforts, particularly natural systems, to blunt the damage from disasters while addressing the WIR Conference attendees. Photo by Rich Wills

Immediate fire response

The fire started from some early electrical sparks that received prompt attention from emergency responders and was fully contained. Hours later, strong winds reignited it.

"The fire trucks weren't gone for more than 45 minutes," said Maui County Councilmember Tamara Paltin, who represents the Lahaina area and lives nearby.

In 17 minutes, nearly 1,700 homes burned and 102 residents died. Winds reaching nearly 100 miles per hour spread the flames, which fed mainly on invasive vegetation that was dried out. People dove into the ocean to avoid the flames. Falling trees blocked exit roads, and nearly half of the residents of a senior living home were unable to escape.

> "We had a lot of people suffering from application fatigue."
>
> – *Tamara Paltin, Maui County*

"We could have had every single fire truck and apparatus in all of California and we still wouldn't have stopped it," said Maui County Office of Recovery Administrator John Smith. "It was the wind. And we just have to recognize that as a reality," when second guessing the response to the fire.



John Smith, administrator of the Maui County Office of Recovery, talks to Association of Oregon Counties Legislative Affairs Manager Branden Pursinger (left), Marion County, Ore. Commissioner Kevin Cameron and Holt County, Neb. Commissioner Bill Tielke outside of the Maria Lanakila Catholic Church in Lahaina's historic district, which survived the fire. Photo by Charlie Ban

Local leaders balanced the efforts in helping the community grasp the human toll with Lahaina's recovery. The county removed more than 400,000 tons of debris and tried to shelter as many survivors as possible.

"In the immediate aftermath of the fire, there was really no thought to policy," Paltin said. "It was just setting up a hub and distributing food and trying to make sure everyone's immediate needs were met. I think I didn't even leave West Maui for at least the first month and a half or so."

The housing displacement multiplied problems. Residents were housed in local hotels before the Federal Emergency Management Agency brought in temporary shelters, but the contracted housing availability also affected tourism —the region's main economic driver — and the workforce coming in from other Hawai'ian islands or the continental United States to rebuild homes. And it wasn't sustainable for local families.

"Although we're so grateful to the hotels, for housing them, when you're having to leave every couple weeks from one hotel room to another, from one hotel to another, from one Airbnb to another, you're not recovering, you're still just surviving," Paltin said. "And the longer that goes on, the harder it is for families to function, to be able to fill out even one more application to get the help that you so desperately need."

FEMA brought in 169 temporary homes — the county code prohibits trailers — that will be transferred to the county in 2027.

Maui County held 130 community meetings to help determine how best to conduct recovery operations with an eye toward community restoration.

Intergovernmental traffic control

Early on, new county legislation tied off-street parking requirements to the number of bedrooms in a house, rather than square footage, aiming to reduce the amount of on-street parking that narrowed access for emergency vehicles.

Paltin is a member of NACo's Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force, which is recommending FEMA's adoption of a universal application for disaster assistance.

"We had a lot of people suffering from application fatigue," she said. "The standard practice is to deny you the first time and it's just disheartening by the 12th application that you filled out 50 pages with information that you no longer have and how to get from all the sources."

A year after the fire, the county established an Office of Recovery, which directs work in Lahaina, rather than adapting existing county departments.

"We realized that to rebuild the entire town and do it efficiently and to do it in a coordinated way, we needed an organization that sits at the top of the org chart in the county that could direct traffic for all of our departments," said Smith, who was a county highway engineer. "We had to do something different. Public Works still has a huge role, but they can't also interact with

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FEMA and the state."

The county has exempted fire-affected residents from property taxes for four years.

Homes on the hillside have been the fastest to return, but the historic district, which once served as capital of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and the commercial sector. have been slower. The county is eying a 2030-2031 restoration of residential housing.

The county also loaned a developer $3 million to fund the replacement for a one-year-old multifamily complex that was destroyed.

"You've got to do crazy stuff like that to make it come back," Smith said. "Otherwise, there's no building there."

Maui County eventually contracted out building permit work to a third party, based on a suggestion by NACo Immediate Past President James Gore, who has experienced wildfires in Sonoma County, Calif., where he is a county supervisor.

"The idea of doing it that way and not burdening your staff with doing 10 times the amount of work they would normally have to do in one year is well worth it," Smith said.

Bissen said that an expedited permitting process has reduced approvals to days, and by early May 2026, 192 homes and buildings have been completed in the burn zone, with nearly 600 more permits approved or in process with another 350 under review. Approximately 310 sites are actively under construction, with 500 housing units complete. That includes 10 affordable housing projects and 1,200 apartments and homes in progress.

"While those numbers matter, what matters most, what they represent is families coming home," Bissen said.

Habitat for Humanity Maui, which was already active in Lahaina before the fire, is accelerating its work. Previously building four homes a year, the organization is dedicating a newly built house every five weeks for the next four months.

"Before the fires, it took me 18 months to get a permit. Our current permitting time on Maui is 330 days," said Habit for Humanity Maui Executive Director Matthew Bachman. "If you are in the burn zone, we can do it in three months. And so, we've been able to really push that, move that needle successfully."



Maui County Councilmember Tamara Paltin. NACo filmed interviews with Paltin that will be released in a video later this year. Photo by Rich Wills

A funding fix

The county's housing assistance program, dubbed Hoʻokumu Hou, pays up to $1.2 million to rebuild a single-family home based on household income, up to $400,000 in homeowners who have already completed reconstruction or $600,000 in assistance to first-time homebuyers.

That program is managed by the county Office of Recovery which handles $2 billion in recovery funding for Lahaina, $1.6 billion of which comes from the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Program — CDBG-DR.

That program has worked out so far for Maui County, but Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawai'i) said the program is in a precarious position.

"The problem with CDBG-DR is there is no originating statute. There are no established best practices, never mind a dedicated office to administrator it," he said. "What that means for affected communities is that their own unmet needs can go unaddressed for months until Congress gets around to doing something about it," by appropriating money for the Disaster Relief Fund.

Schatz proposes permanently authorizing the program, codifying requirements and establishing an office to run it.

"When CDBG works, it is a true lifeline," he said.

Likewise, Schatz is a proponent of risk mitigation.

"The best thing we can do is actually work [to] take down that risk, not to be a backstop against it," he said. "If Lloyd's of London won't do reinsurance, I'm sure your county government is in no position to help, but we are in a position to take down the risk."

> "When CDBG works, it is a true lifeline."
>
> *– Sen. Brian Schatz, (D-Hawai'i)*

He is sponsoring a bipartisan bill that would equip FEMA to help state and local governments improve evacuation runs through better infrastructure planning.

"We did not understand the magnitude of the importance of having evacuation [routes] around us," he said of Lahaina. "It's an old plantation town with one way in and one way out and no one contemplated this type of disaster. If we had evacuation routes, it is possible that lives would have been saved."

Rebuilding Lahaina

"For us, recovery is not only physical, it is cultural, it is emotional and it is spiritual," Bissen said. "This journey has never been solely about rebuilding structures. It has been about restoring stability, rebuilding trust, preserving culture and bringing hope."

Though houses are coming back, much of the town is a relatively blank canvas, littered with foundations and cyclone fences protecting empty swimming pools. Residents and county officials are concerned about gentrification and worry that neighbors will sell their land and start over somewhere else, giving up their investment in the community in the process.

"Nobody was thinking about what Lahaina's going to look like," said Autumn Ness, executive director of the Lahaina Community Land Trust. "You ask New Orleans and ask Houston and ask other big communities that rebuild after a disaster if the people that were there at the time of disaster are still there 10 years later. The answer is a lot of times 'no.'"

The Lahaina Community Land Trust is shooting to protect 20% of homes in the next 10 years, buying land on the speculative market and selling rebuilt houses — but not the land.

"I don't think people understand the 10-, 20-year trajectory after a disaster," Ness said. "It's not just about rebuilding the structures, and it's not even … 'I hope all of our neighbors come back.' But when your neighbors get replaced by profit-driven investors from somewhere else, the character in the neighborhood changes, it's less safe for your kids to ride their bikes down the street. The culture… of this place, that you guys all come here for, starts to erode, and it's so slow, you almost don't even notice it."

Similarly, if a homeowner receives funding from the county's Single-Family Homeowner Reimbursement Program, there are timeframes that give the county the right of first refusal to buy it if the owner sells. The Maui Habitat for Humanity chapter will offer loans of up to $100,000 that will be forgiven if a house remains owner-occupied for 10 years.

Throughout the process, 82 cultural monitors and observers helped protect significant and sacred ground in Lahaina, providing cultural sensitivity training to contactors from all over the country, ranging from Mennonite woodworkers to Hawai'i Electric crews, FEMA workers and the Army Corps of Engineers.

"We are dealing with a lot of contractors that never ever worked in Hawai'i before," said Kapono'ai Molitau, executive director of Maui County Office of Ōiwi Resources, a department that ensures proper management of indigenous resources. "Nobody goes to work in Lahaina town unless they go to sensitivity training. It gives me an opportunity to interrogate everybody that comes to our hub."

Recovery is intertwined with resilience out of necessity, and flooding in March after repeated storms was a chance to "test this place like it has never been tested," Smith said of the hillside homes.

"I'm happy to report that because the county made these units install basins, we stopped [the rains] from flooding the neighborhood." CN

Locals stress planning to avoid 'extractive tourism'

by Charlie Ban
senior writer



Tyler Gomes, chief administrator for Hawaiian Council, notes the there's a constant struggle to ensure that a community's needs drive the tourism industry and not the other way around. Photos by Charlie Ban

As a popular tourist destination, Hawai'i faces a challenge shared by many public lands counties — being loved to death.

That goes for both physical location and the perception. Mitigating the challenges presented by an economy that thrives on visitation takes planning and structure, several Maui County and state officials said during a WIR Conference panel. Failure to do so can degrade communities, slight residents and present a skewed image to the rest of the world.

"Tourism was meant to make life better for people, not worse for people or even impossible," said Maui County Councilmember Keani Rawlins-Fernandez. "Similar to many of your counties, as one of our main economic drivers there's a constant struggle to ensure that our community's needs are what drive the tourism industry and not the other way around."

Hawai'i saw an extreme case of the pendulum swinging away from tourism in 2020, when the pandemic halted visitation to the islands, where small businesses rely close to 90% on tourism for survival.

"We know what happens when tourism turns off overnight — economic collapse in the state of Hawai'i, thousands of businesses just completely turned off," said Tyler Gomes, chief administrator for Hawaiian Council, a Native Community Development Financial Institution.

Protecting place and perception

Gomes said protecting Hawai'ian culture is paramount, and getting easier as old memories fade. For 100 years, advertising around Hawai'ian tourism was crafted by outsiders, whose ad campaigns distorted most elements of local culture.

"The vision that was crafted around that was entirely false and not based on who we are and what we have to offer," Gomes said.

Now, the Hawai'ian Council gets to vet what local products are sold to visitors, ensuring that they are consistent with Hawai'ian culture.

"We get to say, 'That hula skirt that you want made out of grass, that's not something that we are comfortable vouching for,' so we're not going to include that in our marketplace," he said.

The Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources implemented parking and entry limits for state parks in 2018, motivated by both visitor experience and community interest. Many local communities derive their identity from natural features, so the state reserves entry for local residents.

"A lot of these places were never designed for that amount of access," said Maui District Superintendent Michael Kahula. "We're now able to be proactive in a way we can control."

Additionally, in 2023, Maui County started managing access to beach parks, business districts and heavily trafficked areas. Communities

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From TOURISM page 6

opt in to the parking management program, and its Park Maui application has been popular locally, particularly at the beach parking lots.

"We're making sure that they have access to our community, especially in the early morning hours, if they have their ritual – 'I get up and paddle in the morning,' or 'I like to surf before work,' or 'I have a baby luau I need to set up for," said Erin Wade, the county's deputy managing director. "Any time a community comes to us and says 'We're getting relief, we're over this, we need some management,' we work and consult with them to find out what their specific needs are and then district by district, it can vary."

Gomes noted that Honolulu City and County aggressively restricted short-term rentals because they dramatically displaced residents, who left the state entirely. Combatting that was a priority for Honolulu. Maui County also limited vacation rentals in different areas.

"What makes Hawai'i special? Native Hawai'ians," he said. "Losing longtime local families... the housing market is a really great example of people coming here and experiencing sunrise yoga and all of those things and wanting to have that every single day; that is the 'love it to death' demographic."

Maui County Councilmember Nohelani U'u-Hodgins has seen her hometown of Paia gentrify drastically, and the social goalposts move with newer arrivals.

"We have this runaway effect where the newest newcomer adapts only to the other newcomers," she said. "The reality is like we are the litmus for what's normal in Hawai'i, in Paia and all of our towns, so we become fewer and fewer and fewer of us and so the normal changes and the normal is now margaritas and fish tacos and not just poke."



Erin Wade, Maui County's deputy managing director, stresses that visitor education goes a long way to mitigating tourism harms.

Visitor compatibility

Rawlins-Fernandez noted that as private owners buy more Hawaiian land, locals are getting frustrated as they are priced out of their homes.

That wariness toward tourism manifested itself on her island of Molokai with signs stating "Visit, spend, go home," including one that said "visitors not welcome" on the other side.

"I acknowledge that can feel abrasive, but often, the industry will shy away from having those tough discussions, from hearing the community," she said.

Molokai resisted development in the 1970s, and even now, she said, coming there is like visiting Maui in the 1950s.

The Hawaii Tourism Authority's Destination Management Action Plans focus on both attracting ideal visitors and fostering a regenerative tourism model to prevent degradation of local communities.

"These plans can serve as a bridge for bringing people together in a really positive way, people that would have never been in a relationship or had any kind of contractual relationship of any kind before," said Megan Degaia, the authority's destination manager.

The plans convene the communities and the tourism industry, including listening sessions and recruiting and working with stewards, who help educate and protect visitors, creating a multi-ethnic coalition.

"When you have stewards in a place, you have a proper place-making happening, where a visitor can show up and be oriented and better recognize and understand the culture and the ecology, the rich history of where they are, the meanings.

All the stories of the special place. And then, it's going to become easier for them to just know how to behave and fit in and assimilate," she said.

"I think we have a responsibility to pour money into these rural communities and into place-based people to be the ones that are the voice, that are the ones sharing the orientations and you know, funding them, resourcing and elevating and uplifting so that we can see this change that we want to happen."

Wade praised the opportunity for visitors' experiences to integrate with daily life for Hawai'ians, such as in Lahaina in Maui County.

"It clearly wasn't Disney World, because there were real people with real life daily activities happening every single day in Lahaina and that was grounding," she said. "I think it's really important you know around the world when you visit a small town to see what their daily life is like and not have it completely removed, not have the visitor experience completely removed from the day-to-day experience."

As for the ideal visitor level, Gomes said recent trends in visitation are trending toward a more sustainable and manageable level while also optimizing local benefit.

"You ideally want the highest-spending visitor because you get a lower occupancy rate, you get fewer visitors spending [more]. We have more spend in-state since the pandemic than before and we've got one [million] maybe two million [fewer] visitors a year, so it's possible," he said.



Maui District Superintendent Michael Kahula charms the audience with a joke.

Even with a strained relationship between protecting local resources and residents and benefitting from tourism, there is a way to walk the tightrope spanning those interests.

"I think what it comes down to is the mindset. Everybody here, if you go to visit somebody's home, it's real basic, right?" Kahula said.

"We take off our shoes, we treat everybody with respect and we don't take anything, right? The mindset needs to be there. When people can think of themselves as a guest and not a consumer, then everybody has that kind of respect.

"We provide forever memories for everybody and we can take care of these spaces that we want to perpetuate for everyone." CN



2026 Western Interstate Region Conference

May 5-8
Maui County, Hawai'i

IN PHOTOS



From a distance, the more than 150 temporary homes provided by FEMA are visible on a plateau. Photo by Rich Wills



Attendees hold hands in a memorial ceremony for Maui County Councilmember Tasha Kama, who pushed for Maui County to play host to the WIR Conference. Photo by Rich Wills



Garfield County, Utah Commissioner Jerry Taylor, chair of NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee, relates a story to Gregory Nelson, director of the National Center for Public Lands Counties. Photo by Rich Wills



The memorial service for Maui County Councilmember Tasha Kama included participants releasing flower petals into the Pacific Ocean. Photo by Rich Wills



Maui County, Hawai'i Mayor Richard Bissen, Jr. speaks to Lake County, Calif. Supervisor Jennifer Pyska, a member of NACo's Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force. Photo by Rich Wills



Honolulu City And County Small Business and Finance Program Manager Alyssa Goslee, NACo First Vice President George Dunlap, Kodiak Island Borough, Alaska Chair Scott Arndy and Cass County, N.D. Commissioner Jim Kapitan listen to Maui County Recovery Office Administrator John Smith. Photo by Charlie Ban



California State Association of Counties CEO Graham Knaus congratulates outcoming WIR President John Peters, a Mono County, Calif. supervisor. Photo by Charlie Ban



Incoming WIR President Dwayne McFall, a Fremont County, Colo. commissioner, consults with Colorado Counties, Inc. Executive Director Kelly Flenniken.
Photo by Rich Wills



ManyBond President Arthur Scott contemplates the destruction caused by the Lahaina wildfires during a tour of a Lahaina Community Land Trust site. Photo by Charlie Ban



The Hyatt Regency Maui is home to seven African Black-Footed Penguins, which are fed in a public ceremony each day. Photo by Rich Wills



Mary Keating, director of Community Services for DuPage County, Ill., waits for the clouds to pass so she can see the volcanic crater in Haleakalā National Park. Photo by Charlie Ban



Maui County Councilmember Keani Rawlins-Fernandez speaks at a National Center for Public Lands Counties discussion on tourism. Photo by Rich Wills



WIR guests learn to make leis, taught by Hyatt Regency staff. Photo by Rich Wills



Help Maui Rise founder Kenna Reed recounts her organization's efforts to support displaced Lahaina residents. Photo by Rich Wills



WIR Conference attendees climb to one of the summits of Haleakalā National Park. Photo by Charlie Ban



Immediate Past President James Gore, Second Vice President Alisha Bell, First Vice President George Dunlap and President J.D.Clark, made the trip for the NACo Board of Directors meeting. Photo by Rich Wills



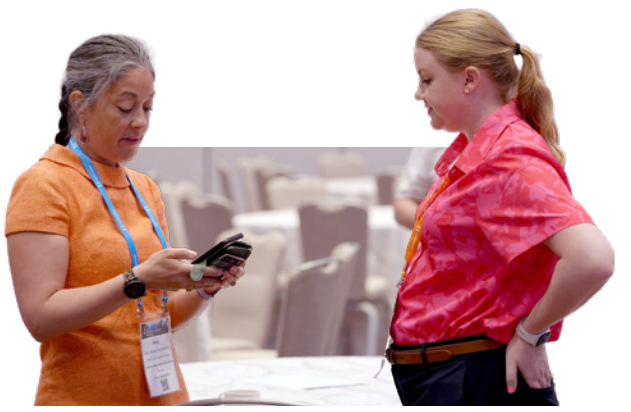
WIR officer Derrick DeGroot, a Klamath County, Ore. commissioner, chats with fellow Oregonian Erin Sklar, a Tillamook County Commissioner. Photo by Rich Wills



Lake County, Calif. Supervisor Jennifer Pyska speaks with NACo Senior Legislative Director Brett Mattson.



Hawai'i put the "Western" in "Western Interstate Region." Attendees emerged from meetings in ballrooms and looked west to the Pacific Ocean.



NACo Legislative Director Charlotte Mitchell Duyshart (right) fields a question from Nevada Association of Counties Interim CEO Amy Hyne-Sutherland. Photo by Charlie Ban



Beaver County, Utah Commissioner Tammy Pearson, Utah Association of Counties Executive Director Brandy Grace and Duchesne County, Utah Recorder Shelley Brennan enjoy the WIR and NACo boards of directors reception. Photo by Rich Wills



Kaua'i County, Hawai'i Councilmember Arryl Kaneshiro, Nationwide's Lisa Quist and NACo's Carlos Greene pause for a photo. Photo by Rich Wills



NACo teased the release of a video shot for the We Are Counties campaign. The video, shot with the Nation Center for Public Lands Counties, features five counties with significant public land in their borders and includes testimonials from county leaders describing the challenge and benefits of managing counties with public lands.