

**Kaua'i**

# Graveyard Of Kaua'i Cows Killed By Anthrax Could Undermine Luxury Homes

A judge will hear a lawsuit that Princeville residents have filed against the developer on Tuesday.

By Allan Parachini, Brittany Lyte / About 8 minutes ago

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Buried beneath an overgrown golf course in the resort community of Princeville are the decomposed remains of hundreds of cattle killed during a series of anthrax outbreaks more than a century ago.

Now a developer wants to transform the former golf course atop this cattle graveyard into dozens of luxury homes and condos. A lawsuit that seeks to shut down the development on Kaua'i's North Shore claims the dead cows left behind millions of still-dangerous anthrax spores capable of sickening animals — and maybe people — if unearthed during construction.

“We’ve asked ourselves, ‘Would we have bought our home here had we known?’ I don’t know,” said Princeville resident Fran White, a plaintiff in the legal challenge whose \$2.5 million home overlooks the proposed site. “It’s a risk, it’s not a certainty. Maybe it’s all fine. But the fact is we don’t know if there’s anything really harmful out here.”



The overgrown nine-hole Woods Course, built in 1971 as part of the premier Princeville Makai Golf Club, is the proposed site of a new luxury home development. It's also the burial ground for hundreds of cattle killed during an anthrax outbreak more than a century ago. (David Croxford/Civil Beat/2025)

[Starwood Capital Group](#), the Miami-based developer that bought the golf course and a nearby luxury hotel in 2018, disputes the existence of anthrax at the site.

“The land in question in and around Princeville has been developed for over 50 years with no reported incidences of anthrax,” Starwood said in a written statement Tuesday. “We consider the plaintiffs’ claims to be self-serving fear mongering. The matter is subject to ongoing litigation and we have made the facts and our position clear.”

Starwood has dug up soil samples, but results of any testing have not been made public. During an excavation last October, cattle bone fragments and a tooth were unearthed, but it's unclear how, or if, they were tested.

Until recently, anthrax had become a forgotten part of the physical and emotional landscape of this 8,000-acre peninsula of pricey hotels, resort condominiums and multimillion-dollar homes, a place that once thrived on the success of plantation-era cattle ranches shuttered decades ago to make way for the tourism economy.

But the public health scare so long ago recently reentered public consciousness when lawyers on both sides of the legal dispute over Starwood's planned Woods Course development dug up details on the more than 500 anthrax-infected cattle who died during a series of Princeville ranch outbreaks between 1890 and 1917.



Scotsman Robert Crichton Wyllie acquired the Princeville plateau in the mid-1800s for sugar cultivation, bestowing the name Princeville on the area to commemorate a visit from King Kamehameha IV, Queen Emma and their 2-year-old son, Prince Albert. The region became a ranch in 1895. This 1924 photograph features a largely undeveloped Princeville with the Hanalei River feeding into Hanalei Bay in the foreground. (Courtesy: Kaua'i Historical Society)

There were warnings more than a century ago that the land in question might be permanently tainted by anthrax. An April 17, 1917, issue of [The Garden Island](#) newspaper on Kaua'i cautioned of the anthrax infestation's future implications, saying "we will have the disease ever with us in hiding, and will be liable (for) an outbreak at any time, perhaps years hence."

The 1917 epidemic, in which 225 cattle reportedly died, is thought to have begun when cattle consumed anthrax-tainted feed on what was then a beef ranch. The area — including what is now the former golf course — was under quarantine for several years. The animal carcasses were allegedly burned, buried and left in place. Lime had been sprinkled on them in an attempt to neutralize the anthrax.

Other historical accounts indicate the anthrax outbreak may have begun as early as 1890 and killed 300 animals at that time — mostly cattle, but some horses, too. The 1890 and 1917 episodes were apparently separate events. There have been no reported anthrax cases in Hawai'i since 1919, according to a review of literature assembled by plaintiffs.

## Anthrax Would Put A 'Black Cloud' Over Project

The implications of the anthrax contamination are key to the lawsuit, in which two Princeville residents whose homes overlook the deteriorating golf course are suing Starwood to stop the housing development.

The anthrax issue was added to the lawsuit in 2023. Initially, the litigation, filed in 2020, sought to prevent developing the golf course into a [luxury camping resort](#) and, later, to prevent a new plan to construct luxury homes.

Starwood, with at least \$115 billion in assets, is a global investment company with interests in real estate and hospitality. It owns Princeville's [1 Hotel Hanalei Bay](#), where the cheapest rooms can cost upward of \$1,200 per night, and the Princeville Makai Golf Club.

Its redevelopment plans, which include dozens of high-end homes, might begin sometime in 2026.

Ronnie Margolis, a prominent Kaua'i real estate agent, said in an email that the possibility of anthrax contamination of the nine-hole Woods Course “would undoubtedly put a black cloud over the project.”

“I have not encountered anything even close to the scenario,” he said. “Homeowners along the course would be in violent opposition based on the diminished value of their assets. It's a gruesome thought to consider the toxicity of it all.”

Greg Kugle, an attorney with the Honolulu firm of [Damon Key Leong Kupchak Hastert](#) who heads the Starwood defense team, did not respond to requests for comment, including specific questions about the lawsuit.

At a 2024 court hearing, however, Kugle said: “We strongly dispute that there’s any evidence that there are active anthrax spores on this property.”



Kaua'i real estate agent Ronnie Margolis said the potential for anthrax to be unearthed during the housing project's development is a legitimate concern. (David Croxford/Civil Beat/2025)

## ‘This Was Our Retirement Dream Place’

When plaintiff Fran White and her husband Andy retired from careers at software companies in San Jose and bought a Princeville home abutting the Woods Course in 2013, they imagined their back lanai would overlook open space in perpetuity.

Opened in 1971, the 27-hole Princeville Makai Golf Club became the cornerstone of a community master plan for the emerging residential-resort town of Princeville, encompassing roughly 8,000 acres of the plateau lands makai of Kūhiō Highway. The golf course is protected from development under Princeville’s original incorporation papers until 2026.



Fran White and her husband Andy purchased a home along Princeville's Woods Course in 2013 thinking that the golf course would remain protected as open space in perpetuity. White is now one of the lead plaintiffs in a lawsuit that seeks to halt development on the overgrown golf course. (David Croxford/Civil Beat/2025)

"It felt like a promise of this area that it would maintain its beauty and its openness," White said. "None of this closure of open space was ever anticipated. The closing documents on the house never said anything about anthrax being out here. This was our retirement dream place but here we are fighting these people."

Starwood contends the nondevelopment agreement terminates next year, leaving it free to build the homes, while White and co-plaintiff Lorraine Mull argue that an automatic extension of the open space protection would occur. The question of whether the development prohibition actually lapses is a major element in the legal dispute, which pits the two Princeville residents against SOF-XI Kauai PV Golf LP, an entity that is part of Starwood's Princeville holdings.

The case is in the Fifth Circuit Court in Lihu'e with Judge Kathleen Watanabe presiding.



Buried beneath the Princeville Makai Golf Club's defunct Woods Golf Course are the carcasses of cattle that died or were killed during a 1917 anthrax outbreak. (Courtesy: Save Open Space Hui/2025)

The original lawsuit sought to halt development of the golf course into a luxury “glamping” resort. But the Kaua'i County Council passed an open space ordinance that would have prohibited that use. Starwood then switched to a proposal to build luxury homes and condos, and the focus of the litigation changed.

The suit now contends that if the anthrax-tainted soil is disturbed it could release spores capable of sickening humans and killing animals. The large size of the site — about 90 acres — means there is no effective way of mitigating the threat, Mull and White argue.

The ground in question, the litigation charges, is safe for some use — as a golf course or park, for example — as long as the soil is not graded in future construction.

“I think digging up an anthrax graveyard is a bad idea,” said Mull, a former attorney who's lived in Princeville for 33 years, during a discussion of the issue at a neighborhood board meeting Tuesday in the nearby town of Kīlauea.

“The science is fairly certain that this is not to be messed around with just for the sake of corporate profits.”



As the plantation culture on Kaua'i's North Shore gave way to an emerging tourism economy, a 27-hole golf course became the cornerstone of a community master plan for the residential-resort town of Princeville, encompassing roughly 8,000 acres of the plateau lands makai of Kūhiō Highway. Development of the Princeville bluff was in full swing by 1979, as seen in this archival photo. (Courtesy: Kaua'i Historical Society/Kelsey Maddox-Bell)

In a deposition in the case, Robert Trent Jones Jr., the famed architect who designed the course, testified that he learned of the presence of anthrax before the course was constructed 50 years ago and said that more dirt was brought in to build up the barrier. Extra care was taken, he said, to design the greens and sand traps to mitigate anthrax concerns.

The legal case is likely to become a battle of expert witnesses who will argue that the anthrax threat is or is not serious. The lawsuit is scheduled for its next hearing Tuesday and trial as early as June.

Dr. Jon-Erik Holty, a clinical associate professor at Stanford University, told Civil Beat that "there may be a potential risk." Compared with other bacteria, he said anthrax spores are stable in soil for decades.



Local elected officials, meanwhile, are worried about effects beyond a direct health threat.

“It’s problematic for the visitor industry and the valuation of the houses,” Kaua’i County Councilwoman Felicia Cowden said the Kilauea Neighborhood Association meeting.

## ‘It’s Everywhere’

Princeville’s buried anthrax spores are likely still dangerous, said John Bradley, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine. But he said he’s not aware that anyone has actually tested exactly how long the spores can survive.

The risk to people now, Bradley said, depends on how the infected carcasses were managed more than a century ago and how the developer plans to monitor for human anthrax exposure during construction — something he said public health officials should weigh in on.



The fountain at the gateway to the Princeville resort community. At the time of the anthrax outbreaks, this area was populated by residences for the former cattle ranch manager and paniolo — Hawaiian cowboys. (David Croxford/Civil

Beat/2025)

The Kaua'i district office of the state Department of Health confirmed that it's aware of the anthrax situation in Princeville. The matter has been referred to the department's Hazard Evaluation and Emergency Response Office in Honolulu, which has discussed the issue with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Environmental Protection Agency. The outcome of those deliberations has not been made public.

Anthrax is a bacterial infection that most commonly begins when a person inhales anthrax spores. It is rare in humans and is not contagious. A common source of anthrax inhalation is the handling of infected animal skins. Anthrax can be fatal in humans when treatment is delayed although there are vaccines, which are 95% effective.

The disease is often perceived as a bioweapon after the [deadly anthrax attacks of 2001](#), when anthrax-laced letters killed five Americans and sickened another 17 people, many of them U.S. postal workers. Several countries, including the former Soviet Union, have used [anthrax as a bioterrorism weapon](#).

Outside of terrorism, humans typically contract anthrax from infected animals — who get sick from spores in soil — or animal products. Among ranchers, [anthrax is an everyday occupational hazard](#), said DeWolfe Miller, an infectious disease epidemiologist at the University of Hawai'i.

“This is the bane of a lot of farmers,” Miller said. “You drive up to the North Shore on O'ahu, you go by a pasture, you see horses — there's going to be anthrax out in that field. I mean, it's everywhere.”

Yet human cases are rare. The last fatal human case of naturally occurring anthrax in the U.S. occurred in 1976 when a woman in weaver in California died after working with infected wool yarn imported from Pakistan. More recently, a severe outbreak in North Dakota in 2002 [killed 53 animals and sickened a veterinarian](#). The vet recovered.

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