

Telescope equipment coming down from Hawaiian mountain

December 16 2015, by Jennifer Sinco Kelleher



In this Aug. 31, 2015 file photo, Kupono Mele-Ana-Kekua, of Kaaawa, Hawaii, blows a conch shell near the summit of Mauna Kea on Hawaii's Big Island. Mele-Ana-Kekua had been camping on the mountain in protest of the Thirty Meter Telescope. Construction equipment and vehicles that have sat idle since protesters blocked crews from building the giant telescope are being removed from a mountain that's considered sacred to some Native Hawaiians. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones, File)

Construction equipment and vehicles that have sat idle since protesters

blocked crews from building a giant telescope are being removed from a mountain that's considered sacred to some Native Hawaiians.

Protesters who oppose the \$1.4 billion Thirty Meter Telescope have been calling for the machinery to be removed after the state Supreme Court earlier this month invalidated the project's permit to build on conservation land of the Big Island volcano.

The equipment is coming down sometime Wednesday, telescope officials said.

"We respect the Hawaii Supreme Court decision and, as good neighbors and stewards of the mountain, TMT has begun relocating construction vehicles and equipment from Maunakea," said a statement from Henry Yang, chair of the TMT International Observatory Board of Governors.

The court sent the matter back for a new contested-case hearing. Telescope officials haven't indicated whether they will pursue a new hearing, which could mean a construction delay of several years.

Mechanics went to the site Tuesday to do maintenance and repairs on vehicles, said Scott Ishikawa, a telescope spokesman.

Protesters have been concerned that the vehicles were leaking, said Kealoha Pisciotta, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit challenging the project's permit.

She said she's relieved that the equipment will be removed. "Mauna Kea is the burial ground of our ancestors, not a parking lot," she said.

After the Dec. 2 court ruling voiding the permit, the state attorney general's office said telescope equipment could remain on the mountain.

A group of universities in California and Canada plan to build the telescope with partners from China, India and Japan. Partners would receive a share of observing time, along with University of Hawaii scientists.

Astronomers revere Mauna Kea because its summit high summit provides a clear view of the sky for 300 days a year, with little air and light pollution. It's expected to enable scientists to see 13 billion light years away for a glimpse into the early years of the universe.

Construction halted in April after 31 protesters were arrested for blocking construction. A second attempt to restart construction in June ended with the arrests of 12 protesters and construction crews in vehicles retreating before reaching the site when they encountered large boulders in the road.

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