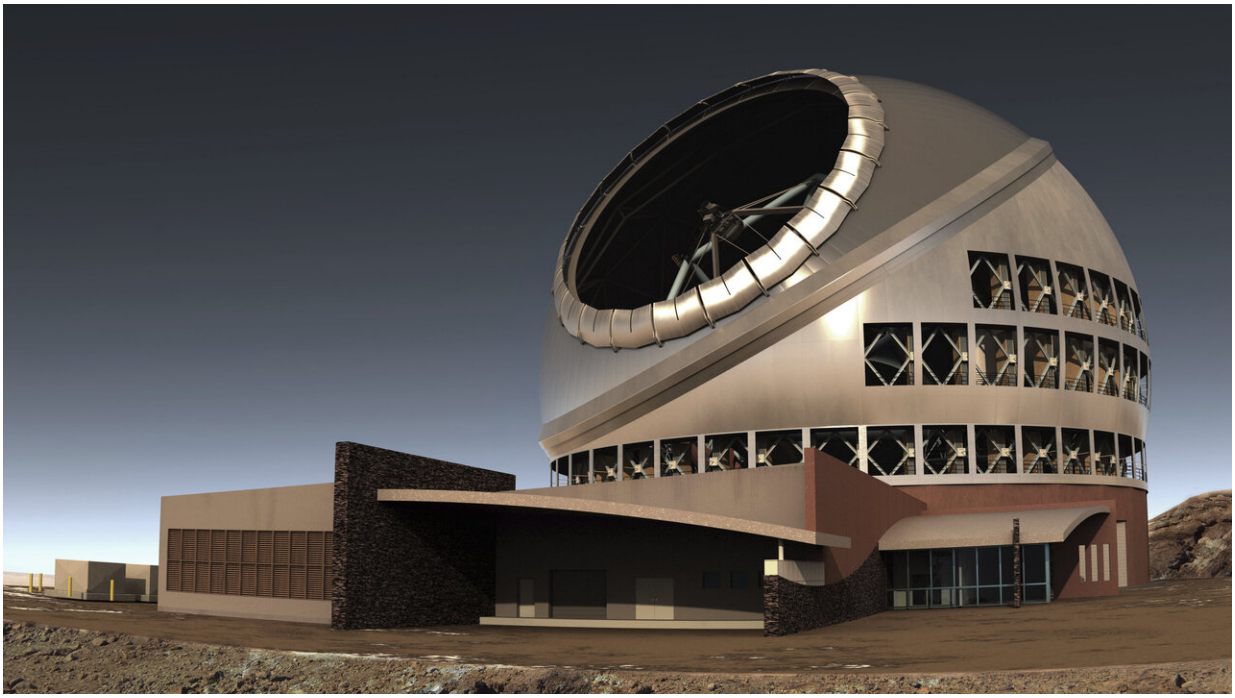
Hawaii telescope protesters don't back down after arrests

July 19 2019, by Caleb Jones



This undated file illustration provided by Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) shows the proposed giant telescope on Mauna Kea on Hawaii's Big Island. Construction on giant telescope to start again in the third week of July 2019, after court battles over Hawaii site that some consider sacred. (TMT via AP, File)

Protesters didn't back down from their long-running effort to stop construction of a $1.4 billion telescope, blocking a road Thursday to the top of a mountain sacred to some Native Hawaiians a day after

authorities arrested nearly three dozen people.

Activists have fought the Thirty Meter Telescope in the courts and on the streets for years, but the latest protest could be their final stand as they run out of legal options. The state Supreme Court has given the green light to the project that would put one of the world's most powerful telescopes atop Mauna Kea on the Big Island.

Gov. David Ige has signed an emergency proclamation to broaden the state's power to keep activists off Hawaii's tallest peak. It came after police negotiated with protesters for days before arresting a small group of 34 activists who refused to move from the road Wednesday.

"The number of protesters have swelled and their blockage of roads and highways creates a dangerous situation," Ige said. "This affects the ability of first responders to address emergencies."

Ige also said the protest is affecting the public's ability to move "freely and safely" across the Big Island. A critical highway that cuts across the center of the island and leads to the road up Mauna Kea was closed for several hours Wednesday because of the protests.

Police in riot gear are lined up on a road in Hawaii where an estimated 2,000 people are gathered to protest construction of a telescope on a mountain that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred, on Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawaii, Wednesday, July 17, 2019. Hawaii County Managing Director Wil Okabe says officials on Wednesday closed a highway leading to the protest site so a convoy of construction equipment can be brought up Mauna Kea. Protesters are off to the side of the road, singing. (Cindy Ellen Russell/Honolulu Star-Advertiser via AP)

Officials haven't yet decided whether to oust the protesters entirely, but the proclamation makes that possible, Ige said.

"We are certainly committed to ensuring the project has access to the

construction site," Ige said. "We've been patient in trying to allow the protesters to express their feelings about the project."

The state said construction equipment planned to go up the mountain starting Monday, but the protests have delayed it. It's unclear when the work would begin.

Officers from the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources arrest protesters, many of them elderly, who are blocking a road to prevent construction of a giant telescope on a mountain that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred, on Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawaii, Wednesday, July 17, 2019. Police were taking away about 30 elders, who were prepared to be arrested. Protest leader Kealoha Pisciotta says hundreds of protesters moved aside to allow the elders to be taken away. (Cindy Ellen Russell/Honolulu Star-Advertiser via AP)

After the arrests, most of the protesters have been allowed to stay, and many were camping out at night on public land.

A group of existing telescopes sit atop Mauna Kea and have been used by NASA and other scientists to make discoveries about space for decades. The mountain has consistently clear weather and very little light pollution.

Plans to build the new telescope began in 2009, but Native Hawaiian opponents who say the mountain is sacred have slowed construction with drawn-out legal battles and by physically blocking crews from starting work.

The sun sets behind telescopes at the summit of Mauna Kea, Hawaii's tallest mountain, Sunday, July 14, 2019. Hundreds of demonstrators gathered at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. State and local officials will try to close the road to the summit of Mauna Kea Monday morning to allow trucks carrying construction equipment to make their way to the top. Officials say anyone breaking the law will be prosecuted. Protestors have blocked the roadway during previous attempts to begin construction and have been arrested. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

They have sued again to argue that the project must post a security bond equivalent to the construction contract cost before starting to build.

Telescope officials said the challenge lacks merit and is another delay tactic.

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