Still blocked from Hawaii peak, telescope seeks Spain permit (Update)

August 5 2019, by Joseph Wilson And Caleb Jones

In this July 15, 2019, file photo, demonstrators block a road at the base of Hawaii's tallest mountain, in Mauna Kea, Hawaii, to protest the construction of a giant telescope on land that some Native Hawaiians consider sacred. The University of Hawaii's board is forming a task force to study the school's management of Mauna Kea's summit, which is currently at the center of long-running protests against the construction of a new telescope. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

The group behind a $1.4 billion telescope planned for Hawaii is applying for a permit to build in Spain as ongoing protests and a human blockade prevent them from starting construction on Mauna Kea, Hawaii's highest peak that some people consider sacred.

The plan to start construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on the Big Island has been thwarted for more than three weeks by a group of Native Hawaiian activists who say the construction will further desecrate a mountain that already has more than a dozen observatories.

Thirty Meter Telescope Executive Director Ed Stone said in a statement Monday that the group still wants to break ground on Mauna Kea, but they need to have a backup plan.

"We continue to follow the process to allow for TMT to be constructed at the 'plan B' site in (Spain) should it not be possible to build in Hawaii," Stone said. "Mauna Kea remains the preferred site."

But Native Hawaiian activists say they will not budge until the project moves elsewhere.

Protest leaders, who say they are not against science or astronomy , told The Associated Press that the Spain permit is a positive development, but it's not enough for them to end their blockade of Mauna Kea's access road, where more than 2,000 people have gathered at times.

"There's lots of good science to be done from the Canary Islands," said Kealoha Pisciotta, who has helped organize the protest on Mauna Kea. It would "be a win for everyone."

In this July 24, 2009 file photo, the Gran Telescopio Canarias, one of the the world's largest telescopes is seen at the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory in the Canary Island of La Palma, Spain. A leading Spanish official said Monday Aug. 5, 2019, that the consortium pushing to build a giant telescope in Hawaii amid continued protests by locals is planning to ask for a building permit for an alternative site in Spain's Canary Islands. The notification comes as Native Hawaiian protesters enter the fourth week of blocking construction of the telescope on a mountain they consider sacred. (AP Photo/Carlos Moreno, File)

But she said there is no trust between the activists, who call themselves protectors of the mountain, and telescope officials.

Kaho'okahi Kanuha, another protest leader who has been arrested several times trying to block construction, said he hopes officials make the

"right decision" and move the project to the Canary Islands.

"We remain committed to protecting Mauna Kea from further desecration, no matter how long it takes," he said.

Canary Islands Astrophysics Institute Director Rafael Rebolo told the AP on Monday that he received a letter from the head of the Thirty Meter Telescope saying its board recently decided "to proceed with the request to seek a building permit" for the island of La Palma.

"We are observing what is happening in Hawaii with the maximum respect," said Rebolo, the point man for the alternative site in Spain's Canary Islands.

In this July 14, 2019 file photo, native Hawaiian activists pray at the base of Hawaii's Mauna Kea pictured in background. A leading Spanish official said Monday Aug. 5, 2019, that the consortium pushing to build a giant telescope in Hawaii amid continued protests by locals is planning to ask for a building permit for an alternative site in Spain's Canary Islands. The notification comes as Native Hawaiian protesters enter the fourth week of blocking construction of the telescope on a mountain they consider sacred. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones, File)

Actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, left, talks with TMT opposition leader Kaho'okahi Kanuha during a visit to the protests against the TMT telescope, Wednesday, July 24, 2019, at the base of Mauna Kea on Hawaii Island. (Jamm Aquino/Honolulu Star-Advertiser via AP)

Astronomers Alan Stockton, center, holding a sign saying "Built It!," and Alan Tokunaga, left, join a rally in support the Thirty Meter Telescope outside the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu on Thursday, July 25, 2019. Supporters said the giant telescope planned for Hawaii's tallest mountain will enhance humanity's knowledge of the universe and bring quality, high-paying jobs, as protesters blocked construction for a second week. (AP Photo/Audrey McAvoy)

Supporters of the Thirty Meter Telescope, foreground, gather for a rally outside the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu on Thursday, July 25, 2019, as opponents of the telescope gather across the street. Supporters said the giant telescope planned for Hawaii's tallest mountain will enhance humanity's knowledge of the universe and bring quality, high-paying jobs, as protesters blocked construction for a second week. (AP Photo/Audrey McAvoy)

"Our position is that we are here if the TMT project needs us," he said in a telephone interview.

After years of protests and contentious legal battles, the Hawaii Supreme Court last year ruled the telescope permits were valid, clearing the way for the construction to proceed. Thirty Meter Telescope officials first announced the backup location in the Canary Islands in 2016.

Rebolo said local officials who would have jurisdiction over a building permit on La Palma solidly back the project and that the observatory site has already passed environmental impact evaluations. "Our mountains are not sacred," he added.

Scientists selected Mauna Kea's summit because the weather and air conditions there are among the best in the world for viewing the skies. The telescope would give researchers a view back to the deepest reaches of the universe and allow them to examine the time immediately following the Big Bang.

Once built, scientists are expected to use the telescope to explore fundamental questions about the universe , including whether there's life outside our solar system and how stars and galaxies formed. The large size of the telescope's mirror means it would collect more light, allowing it to see faint, far-away stars and galaxies.

In this Sunday, July 14, 2019, file photo, the sun sets behind telescopes at the summit of Mauna Kea in Hawaii. The man tasked with trying to find a way out of an impasse over the construction of a giant telescope in Hawaii says he met with Native Hawaiian leaders. But the only issue they reached a consensus on was to meet again. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones, File)

Big Island Mayor Harry Kim, whom Hawaii's governor tasked with finding common ground among Native Hawaiian leaders, protesters and telescope stakeholders, said it would be a loss for his island and the state if the telescope was built in Spain.

"I thought this could be a good thing for Hawaii if done the right way," Kim said.

But the mayor also acknowledged that injustices against the Native Hawaiian community need to be addressed. "Part of the right way is a recognition of wrongs of past," he said.

The mayor said his responsibility is to find a better way forward that addresses the many complicated issues involved with the battle over the telescope, including the economics for the Big Island.

He said he doesn't want his county's entire economy to be based on tourism like it is on the other islands in Hawaii.

Actor Jason Momoa holds the hands of his children, Nakoa-Wolf Momoa, left, and Lola Momoa, right, as he is welcomed with a hula while visiting elders and

Native Hawaiian protesters blocking the construction of a giant telescope on Hawaii's tallest mountain, at Mauna Kea Access Road on Wednesday, July 31, 2019, in Mauna Kea, Hawaii. (Hollyn Johnson/Hawaii Tribune-Herald via AP)

On "Maui, Kauai, and Oahu, the vast, vast majority of those people on those islands and counties can no longer own a home because of what has happened economically," he said.

"If this opportunity is lost, and I do mean it, there will be a sadness on my part," Kim said. "Not only because of science and education and opportunity, part of my responsibility is to try to find ways to make a better economic base for this island."

Gov. David Ige did not respond to a request for comment.

Last week, Spain's science minister, Pedro Duque, reiterated the government's full support for the Canary Islands as a secondary site for the telescope and said the country is well-prepared to host it.

"We have all the necessary plans at all levels—the people, the speed, the systems, absolutely everything is ready if they want to come," Duque said.

The Canary Islands archipelago, located west of Morocco in the eastern Atlantic Ocean, is already home to several powerful telescopes.

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