

Protest: 'No plan, no scopes'

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TELESCOPE PLAN

Public-comment meetings on the Pan-STARRS telescope proposal continue Tuesday on Maui at the Cameron Center and Wednesday on O'ahu at the UH-Manoa Center for Hawaiian Studies Kamakakuoka-lani Building. The meetings begin at 6 p.m.

HILO, Hawai'i — Work on a major environmental study to prepare the way for the proposed Pan-STARRS telescope on Mauna Kea should stop until a new management plan for protecting the mountain's cultural and environmental resources is completed, critics of the project said last night.

The University of Hawai'i Institute for Astronomy wants to remove an existing 88-inch UH telescope and replace it with Pan-STARRS, which would be a futuristic, robotically operated telescope designed to rapidly scan and photograph the night sky to detect asteroids or comets that could threaten Earth.

Meetings began this week to invite public comment as planners begin work on a federal environmental impact statement for Pan-STARRS, or the Panoramic Survey Telescope and Rapid Response System.

Last night's meeting at the University of Hawai'i-Hilo was attended by about 50 people, including the staff working on the project. Critics of the project brought signs demanding "Military Off Mauna Kea" and "No Plan, No Scopes."

Kealoha Pisciotta, president of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou, said a comprehensive management plan for the mountain was required in a ruling last year by Hilo Circuit Judge Glenn Hara in connection with a court challenge to another Mauna Kea astronomy project.

She said planners should stop all work on a federal environmental impact statement on the project until the management plan is completed. Mauna Kea Anaina Hou is a cultural group with ties to the mountain.

“Fear-based tactics are being used to build public support,” Pisciotta said in her testimony. “By claiming Pan-STARRS observatory is urgently needed to search not just for asteroids but ‘Killer Asteroids,’ fear-based tactics are being used to displace careful reasoning, and inconvenient evidence is either set aside or discounted.”

Earlier this month, the Hawaiian-environmental alliance Kahea also called for a halt to work on the EIS. Kahea executive director Cha Smith charged that to move ahead with Pan-STARRS before the management plan is complete “is contemptuous of Hawaiian rights, the law and the fragile ecology of the sacred summit.”

Rolf-Peter Kudritzki, director of the UH Institute for Astronomy, said he was “almost stunned” at the criticism early in the public-comment portion of the planning for Pan-STARRS.

“I think we’re doing something very good with Pan-STARRS, and I had hoped people would understand that, but if they don’t, I think we should have a dialogue,” he said.

UH scientists have developed “unique technology” for detecting dangerous asteroids that could present a severe threat to mankind, and the superior observation conditions on Mauna Kea make it the best place in the world for Pan-STARRS, he said.

Kudritzki said the odds that an asteroid will strike the Earth and cause a major catastrophe over the next century is about 1 in 1,000. Pan-STARRS would inventory near-Earth asteroids down to a size of about 330 yards across, he said.

“Finding these objects 30 to 50 years before they could impact us, and then doing something about it, I think is very important science. I really have a hard time understanding why one doesn’t acknowledge that,” Kudritzki said.

The four 71-inch mirrors gathering light for Pan-STARRS would

each be hooked up to what would be the four largest digital cameras ever built. The system would be able to survey the entire sky once a week, and would be able to detect asteroids as small as 1,000 feet across.

Mauna Kea is considered sacred to some Hawaiians, and astronomers hoped the \$80 million to \$100 million Pan-STARRS project would be more palatable because it would be built on a site that has already been developed for astronomy.

For years, critics of continued development on Mauna Kea urged astronomers to replace aging telescopes with newer facilities rather than develop new sites for new telescopes.

Reusing existing sites would avoid disturbing more of the mountain, which according to Hawaiian legend is the meeting place of the sky god Wakea and the Earth mother Papa, the parents of the first ancestor of the Hawaiian people.

There has been little or no opposition to redeveloping a small site to replace a 1968 telescope on Mauna Kea with a larger and more modern instrument that would be used by the University of Hawai'i-Hilo, but it now appears the Pan-STARRS project will encounter more resistance.

"We support astronomy, but we do not support astronomy at the expense of all the other rare and unique aspects of Mauna Kea," Pisciotta said in written testimony.

"Mauna Kea is a house of prayer. It is a place for ceremony and prayer. Group 70 and UHIFA know this. They do not care. People in Hawai'i have been explaining this to UHIFA and Group 70 representatives for 30 years," Pisciotta wrote. "If the Catholic people or Jewish people repeatedly asked UHIFA to stop disrespecting or desecrating their temples, would you continue to ignore them?"

Kudritzki said the federal environmental impact statement for Pan-STARRS can proceed because the federal process is separate from the state process. However, the management plan must be complete before the EIS is finalized and accepted.

The federal EIS is required because the project uses federal money

— it is funded by the U.S. Air Force — and federal law requires that public review of the project begin “as early as possible,” Kudritzki said.

The management plan is required before the state Board of Land and Natural Resources can issue a state conservation district use permit for a new observatory on the mountain.

The state Office of Mauna Kea Management has begun cultural and environmental studies that will eventually be part of the management plan, and the plan should be complete by the time Pan-STARRS seeks its state permit, Kudritzki said.

Critics also questioned the military’s involvement in the project.

Kudritzki said the facility will be owned and operated by the Institute for Astronomy, and a statement from the Air Force handed out at last night’s meeting announced the telescope will not do classified research. The Air Force “will not determine or influence” the operation of the facility, according to the statement.

However, critic Tom Peek pointed out that the Air Force acknowledges it will have access to the data gathered and the technology that is developed for the project.

“Telescopes that serve military goals are inappropriate on a sacred mountain,” Peek said.

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