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In TMT Hearing, Sierra Club Director Makes Several Dubious Assertions

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On January 10, Marti Townsend, executive director of the Hawai'i Chapter of the Sierra Club, took the witness stand in the contested case hearing on the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). She testified for the better part of five hours, with most of that time spent responding to softball questions lobbed her way by a dozen or so parties to the contested case who oppose the TMT.

In the 2011 contested case hearing over the TMT, Townsend, who is an attorney, represented KaHEA: the Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance. This time around, she was testifying, she said, as a volunteer board member of KaHEA, with her written testimony appearing on KaHEA letterhead.

Environment Hawai'i asked Townsend for comment on each of the issues raised below. She did not provide any.

Views

The first cross-examiner was Deborah Ward, who asked about the potential impacts of the TMT on views from several areas near the summit. Relying on a site visit made in 2011, when a red balloon was lofted from the proposed TMT site to the full height of the telescope, Townsend stated that the position of the balloon showed that it would be impossible to look toward Haleakala from the Keck telescopes on the summit ridge without seeing the TMT.

Townsend added: "We also engaged in another simulation, where we went up to Pu'u Poliahu ... and there, too, the red balloon was still in the sky. And from there you could see that it would be impossible to get a view of, say, the rising sun without the TMT in the viewplane."

In fact, the proposed TMT site is almost directly north of Pu'u Poliahu and could not possibly interfere with views of the sunrise from Pu'u Poliahu.

Ward then asked if, from Poliahu, the TMT would also obstruct views of Pu'u Makenaka. Makenaka is a cinder cone where a number of pre-contact Hawaiian sites and burials have been located.

"Yes," Townsend replied.

Makenaka, however, is about 3 1/2 miles northeast of Poliahu and not visible from Poliahu even on a clear day, since the summit ridge, at 13,780 feet, rises between those two cinder cones.



Marti Townsend, executive director of the Sierra Club, Hawai'i Chapter, testifying at the TMT contested case hearing. Credit: NaLooTV

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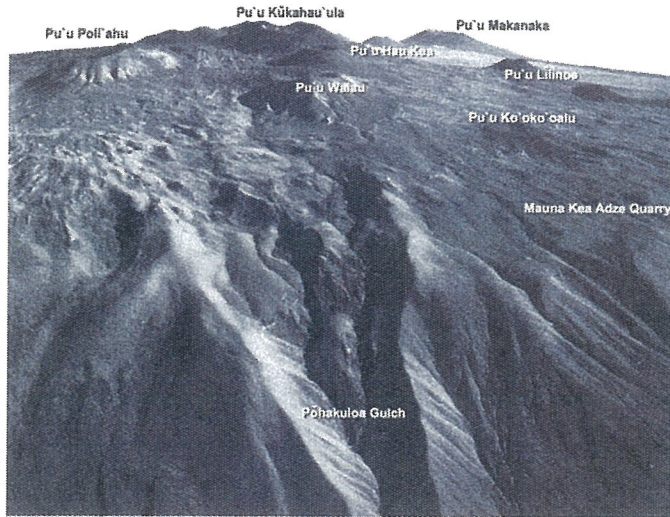


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EXHIBIT A-150



Credit: TMT EIS

Building Size

Throughout her testimony, at several points, Townsend stated the Thirty Meter Telescope would be “an 18-story, five-acre building,” describing it as “a structure bigger than anything on the island of Hawai’i.”

While the height of the dome would be around the same as an 18-story building, the telescope base would be around 215 feet in diameter, with a footprint of around 35,000 square feet, or about 0.85 acres. Even adding the support structure (21,000 square feet) and utility building (6,000 square feet), the total ground occupied by the telescope and ancillary structures comes to about an acre and a half.

It is unclear whether it was Townsend or someone else who first described the TMT in this fashion. However, at least one witness who followed Townsend, Kehau Abad, used the identical description in her testimony.

The Wekiu Bug



Wekiu bug on Mauna Kea. Credit: Karl Magnacca

In the first TMT contested case hearing, the tiny wekiu bug, found only at the summit of Mauna Kea, was a candidate endangered species. Soon after that case ended, the wekiu bug was removed from the candidate species list.

Yet when asked by Ward to discuss the widened jeep trail leading to the TMT site, Townsend said that the widening had destroyed wekiu bug habitat. “It’s been decimated,” she said. “That cinder has been compacted. And wekiu can’t live in compacted cinder. ... They are endangered, and they are a beautiful symbol of the kind of unique and amazing natural environment in Hawai’i.”

“When you say endangered, you mean rare and threatened?” Ward asked.

“Right.” Townsend replied, “but their habitat is being lost and they are at risk of being listed as an endangered species.”

The university’s Comprehensive Management Plan for Mauna Kea states this: “ten years of study following the 1997-98 surveys suggest that wekiu bugs are still abundant on Mauna Kea, and that they are able to reside in both undeveloped and developed areas at the summit.” They are not federally listed either as threatened or endangered.

Comprehensive Management Plan

In 2006, Judge Glenn Hara determined that there could be no new telescopes until the University of Hawai’i had completed a comprehensive management plan (CMP). Townsend criticized the resulting plan for dealing only with university-managed lands, “when it should be all [Department of Land and Natural Resource’s] property, all of the property under the DLNR’s responsibility.”

“Judge Hara’s ruling concluded that in order to truly manage a Conservation District, the management plan must cover multiple land uses and must take into consideration the entire Conservation District,” Townsend said, “and there was some discussion about how the Conservation District of Mauna Kea is more than just the astronomy precinct and it’s more than just the summit. It could be all the way down to the Saddle Road so it could include all the palila habitat at the lower levels.”

Hara’s order actually stated that the CMP was to address “multiple land uses within the larger overall area that the [University of Hawai’i Institute for Astronomy] controls at the top of Mauna Kea in the Conservation District.”

Telescope Permits

In response to a question from Clarence Ching, Townsend stated as a fact that many of the telescopes were built without permits.

Ching: "Do you know, historical-wise, whether all of the observatories on the mountain were constructed in compliance with Conservation District Use Permits?"

Townsend: "Oh, they weren't. Many of them were retroactively permitted."

Ching: "Really? So how did that happen?"

Townsend: "I'm not exactly sure how that happened. It's shocking to me. But through the early '80s to mid-'90s several telescopes were built without Conservation District Use Permits."

Petitioner Harry Fergstrom picked up on that point. "So, they got away with it 13 times already," he said.

To which Townsend replied, "Several telescopes were built without permits at all, at the time."

Sam Lemmo, administrator of the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Office of Conservation and Coastal Lands, speculated that Townsend may have been referring to the Submillimeter Array (SMA), which consists of eight six-meter dishes that are arrayed at any given time in configurations that can mimic the collecting ability of a single dish up to half a kilometer in diameter. Thirteen pads were built to accommodate the SMA dishes. The SMA, Lemmo said, "is considered one telescope observatory," but opponents have argued that it should be considered 13.

Noise

Fergstrom also picked up on a statement Townsend had made about noise generated by telescopes at the summit. "You said the noise was 'particularly intrusive,'" Fergstrom said, then asking her to elaborate.

"As it is now," Townsend replied, "it's hard to find a quiet spot on the summit area of Mauna Kea. During the day, to keep the telescopes cool, air conditioning compressors – engines, are going all the time. They'll shut off, and they'll turn on. And they're going at different times. It's a loud rumble, an engine sound. Almost like a plane. And the TMT, which would be significantly larger than the existing telescopes, would require similar air conditioning. And so the noise that will be created, if the TMT were constructed, would just be immense and would make it even harder to find a quiet spot on the mountain."

The environmental impact statement for the abandoned Keck outrigger telescope proposal, published in 2006 and referred to often and approvingly by TMT opponents, describes background noise levels both at the summit and the Hale Pohaku facilities, at the 9,000-foot level, as consisting "primarily of sounds associated with the wind and vehicular noise. The summit of Mauna Kea normally has a low ambient noise level. Existing facility operations generate extremely low noise levels."

Glaciers and a Sinking Summit

Under questioning from Lanny Sinkin, Townsend stated that the development of the TMT would continue the "urban sprawl" of telescopes on the Mauna Kea summit, resulting in an "industrial park up there."

"And you can see that on Mauna Kea already. ... You had one telescope in 1968 and that telescope spawned another one ... so you had sprawl on the summit and as a result the summit is now 38 feet shorter than it was before the university leased it. And that's just unreal."

As a result, Townsend continued, "cultural practitioners have now identified Pu'u Wekiu as the relocated summit because the original summit is so much shorter now."

Pu'u Wekiu has been recognized as the summit of Mauna Kea since at least 1955, when a U.S. Geological Survey benchmark was placed on the summit, identifying it as having an elevation of 13,796 feet above mean sea level.

Townsend also apparently believes that glaciers are still to be found on the mountain.

Cindy Freitas asked Townsend if she had knowledge of the glaciers on Mauna Kea. "I know that they exist, that's about it," Townsend replied.

Glaciers last existed on Mauna Kea around 10,000 years ago.

– Patricia Tummons

Patricia Tummons

2 Responses

 Millani B. Trask
Aloha Pat,

February 7, 2017 | Reply



Thus is not the first time that Marti Townsend has not been honest & truthful about issues of critical import to Hawaiians & our culture. When the issue was the Northwest Hawaiian Islands Monument, Townsend and Sierra Club had initially revealed that the US had approved the testing & importation of coral diseases into the pristine area that were later "inadvertently" dumped into the sea. Their case was filed but never pursued, later they decided to support the expansion joining the team of the mighty PEW Foundation that backed the Monument as well as an exemption for the US military activities in the area including unlimited fishing. Mart Townsend & Sierra Club would not support the subsistence fish rights of Hawaiians.

Credible publications like Environment Hawaii should heads up whenever Townsend & Sierra Club are involved as their testimony and data may be fabricated for political reasons. Many no longer trust Townsend, her board or their public representations.

Miliani B. Trask



Andrew Cooper

February 8, 2017 | Reply

The claim that the TMT would be "a structure bigger than anything on the island of Hawai'i" is one that gets repeated quite a bit. It is not even close! The largest structure on the island is probably the Prince Kuhio Plaza with 510 thousand square feet of retail space. The plaza simply dwarfs the TMT footprint by a factor of ten!

This and so many other misrepresentations of the facts by telescope opponents has grown tiresome, making a mockery of the contested case process.

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Environment Hawai'i

190 Keawe St., Suite 29
Hilo HI 96720

877-934-0130

mail@environment-hawaii.org

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