

# The Washington Post

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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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## House votes to force acceptance of rail deal

Goal is to bypass strike as unions push Senate to support paid sick days

BY LAUREN KAORI GURLEY  
AND LIZ GOODWIN

The House voted Wednesday to force a deal between freight rail carriers and unions, blocking a potential strike that threatened travel, supply chains and the busy holiday shopping season.

The legislation heads to the Senate, where its path could be more fraught, but leaders of both parties have vowed to act quickly.

Without a deal, the unions are poised to strike as early as Dec. 9. Four of 12 unions involved had voted down a contract, brokered by the White House, that lacked paid sick days or changes to an attendance policy that rail workers say is punitive. A shutdown of the nation's railway systems could cost the economy as much as \$2 billion a day, according to the rail carriers trade group.

The House voted 290-137, with bipartisan support, on the bill that would force the rail deal that was brokered by the White House. But the chamber also narrowly approved a separate version of the rail deal, 221-207, to give rail workers seven paid sick days, a move that liberal Democrats in the House, as well as Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), have pushed for.

"Today we are here to safeguard the financial security of America's families, to protect the American economy as it continues to recover and avert a devastating nationwide rail shutdown," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said at the start of the floor

SEE RAIL DEAL ON A16



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Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.) walks to the Capitol after being elected leader of the House Democrats, becoming the first Black person to lead a major political party in Congress. His election is a shift for the caucus after being led by Rep. Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) for two decades.

## Time of transition to House minority

DEMOCRATS ELECT JEFFRIES AS LEADER

Changes will test ability to unite without Pelosi

BY MARIANNA SOTOMAYOR  
AND CAMILA DECHALUS

Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.) was elected Wednesday to lead House Democrats in the next Congress, making history as the first Black person to lead either party in either chamber and taking on the responsibility of keeping the caucus united on policies and messaging as they set their sights on winning back the majority next term.

Jeffries, as well as Minority Whip-elect Katherine M. Clark (D-Mass.) and Caucus Chair-elect Pete Aguilar (D-Calif.), will take on their positions during a moment of transition for the party, which will be fighting to protect two years of legislative victories won under a Democratic president with control of both chambers in Congress. They also will be faced with ensuring the ideological factions within the caucus are heard and represented in key decisions, a desire members have long had after decades of centralized power wielded by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who announced in November that she was stepping back from leadership.

While the lack of a singular strong hand can present challenges coalescing the caucus in a majority, being in the minority could allow Democrats to find consensus

SEE DEMOCRATS ON A20

◆**PKCapitol:** Democrats turn to two leaders from the same borough. **A2**

## Biden to honor tribes by protecting Nevada land

BY DAN MICHALSKI

SEARCHLIGHT, NEV. — From the highway, Spirit Mountain — a 5,642-foot-high peak — appears gray. But, at times, it glows a majestic pink. For the Fort Mojave and 11 other tribes, these mystical rocks are the site from which their ancestors emerged.

"There's a spiritual connection that makes us Mojave people," said Tim Williams, chair of the tribal council. "If it's not protected, our generation will not have done our job."

Two decades ago, Congress preserved the mountain — called Avi

Renewable energy firms raise concerns about widely supported move

Kwa Ame (ah-VEE-kwah-may) in Mojave — and 33,000 acres around it as wilderness. Now the Biden administration is reading a proclamation that could put roughly 450,000 acres — spanning almost the entire triangle at the bottom of the Nevada map — off limits to development under the 1906 Antiquities Act.

When finalized, it will probably rank as the largest act of land conservation that President Biden will undertake this term, in a spot within comfortable driving distance of Las Vegas. And although tribes have often been pressured to make concessions in the past, this marks a rare instance in which they have driven the process — bolstered by the support of environmental groups, lawmakers and the rural business community.

At the White House Tribal Nations Summit on Wednesday, Biden committed to conserving the area and noted that he had

invoked the Antiquities Act last year to restore protections to three national monuments.

"Look, there's so much more, there's so much more that we're going to do to protect the treasured tribal lands," he told the group of tribal leaders. "When it comes to Spirit Mountain and surrounding ridges and canyons in southern Nevada, I'm committed to protecting this sacred place that is central to the creation story of so many tribes that are here today."

"And I look forward to being able to visit Spirit Mountain and

SEE NEVADA ON A6



PHOTOS BY KYLE GRILLOT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Spirit Mountain, called Avi Kwa Ame in Mojave. It is a sacred area in Laughlin, Nev., that some tribes consider to be the site from which their ancestors emerged.

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experiences it with you as soon as I can," he added.

Sitting between the Mojave National Preserve on the California side and Lake Mead National Recreation Area along the border of Nevada and Arizona, this 700-square-mile expanse will allow desert tortoises, bighorn sheep, golden eagles and dozens of other species to live and migrate uninterrupted.

"This is the missing link connecting the Mojave Desert and the Colorado Plateau," said Neal Desai, a senior project manager for the National Parks Conservation Association who has been working for more than a dozen years to protect the area.

Some renewable energy advocates warn it could undercut the nation's climate goals. But wind and solar companies, Desai said, will have to stay on the other side of the monument boundaries.

When it comes to having a chance to protect this much land, he added, "this really doesn't happen very often. Not at this scale."

Squeezing out solar?

In mid-November, nearly 250 people gathered at the Aquarius casino resort in Laughlin, Nev., for a two-hour public hearing with officials from the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management to discuss the prospective monument. A little more than two months before, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland had visited the area and held a roundtable on the topic with Rep. Susie Lee (D-Nev.).

Amid a standing-room-only crowd at the casino, only about half of the monument's backers got time to speak.

"Today is special," Williams said. "We've established a map. It's been a collaboration of a lot of different people, a lot of organizations. ... This is something that you don't see every day, especially in this day and age, in this type of

# Spirit Mountain protections unite tribes, artists and environmentalists



Petroglyphs in Hiko Springs Canyon, a creek with cultural significance for the area's tribes. "When it comes to Spirit Mountain and surrounding ridges and canyons in southern Nevada, I'm committed to protecting this sacred place," President Biden said.

political environment. You don't see this type of collaboration, and it's here, and it's now."

Tribes spread out along the Colorado River have adopted resolutions endorsing a monument, including 27 of 28 tribes in the

Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada and all 21 in the Inter-Tribal Association of Arizona.

Several sent representatives to Laughlin, offering their two-minute testimonies about how ancient sites in the area are still an

active part of their lives. Artists, environmentalists, birdwatchers, dark night-sky preservationists, hunters and off-road-vehicle enthusiasts also showed up to voice support for the monument.

Frank DeRosa, vice president

for policy and public affairs for the solar energy firm Avantus, said he supported the creation of a monument but asked BLM to consider "a modest request" for a small adjustment to the map: a "sliver," he called it, that "avoids

all cultural and environmentally sensitive areas," so renewable energy companies can access transmission infrastructure from a long-decommissioned coal-fired plant in Laughlin.

This expanse of Nevada offers some of the best prospects for clean energy development in the country. The canyons here produce tremendous wind, and the sun shines 292 days per year, usually without any cloud cover. The area also boasts dozens of mining claims for rare earth elements, now coveted by the clean tech sector.

Four massive solar farms loom along U.S. 95 between Las Vegas and Searchlight. More than 100 turbines from the White Hills wind farm in Arizona are visible from some of the higher points within the proposed monument.

The Avi Kwa Ame map, as it has been drawn, prevents similar projects from breaking ground. In previous negotiations with the town of Laughlin, the tribes agreed to exclude 23,000 acres from their proposal so a large solar project at the southern tip of Clark County could continue. But they would not make similar concessions for an area abutting California's Dead Mountains Wilderness, on the grounds that the area is sacred.

Redrawing any portions of the plan now, Williams said, was not an option. "All the resolutions, all the agreements, were based on that map being presented as final."

The BLM has identified more than 9 million acres of its land in the state for potential large-scale solar projects, according to Interior, and an additional 16.8 million acres for possible wind energy development. The federal government has classified roughly 83 percent of the area the tribes have proposed protecting as either wilderness or "areas of critical environmental concern" as part of an effort to conserve critical desert



LEFT: Fort Mojave Tribal Chairman Tim Williams delivers remarks during the public hearing to urge the Bureau of Land Management to designate the area Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Laughlin.



RIGHT: Kim Garrison Means with the Mystery Ranch stands on her property in Searchlight. "It was surprising how together our community was" in wanting to protect the land, she said.



PHOTOS BY KYLE GRILLLOT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ABOVE: An aerial view of a large solar field north of the proposed national monument in Boulder City, Nev. Some advocates of renewable energy say the protection of Spirit Mountain could hamper the nation's climate goals. BELOW: Coyotes in Searchlight, Nev.



tortoise habitat.

A week ago, according to an individual familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations, the chief of staff to Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak (D) met with an official from the White House Council on Environmental Quality to discuss the coming proclamation. Sisolak's aide raised concerns about whether hunters had sufficient input into the process, this person said, and what effects the designation would have on renewable energy development.

Biden officials assured the governor's office that hunters could continue to sustain artificial water sources, known as guzzlers, to attract bighorn sheep, according to the individual. The officials added that the state would be allowed to access and maintain existing infrastructure — including water resources and electric transmission lines — under any monument designation.

On Wednesday, Sisolak endorsed the idea in a Twitter

thread, in which he thanked Biden and Interior officials for working with the state and other groups on the designation.

"Designating the sacred Tribal site of Spirit Mountain and the surrounding Mojave Desert as a national monument and providing for appropriate management will ensure we will continue to preserve our rich cultural history and protect our rare and threatened wildlife," he tweeted.

#### Political climate change

For decades, activists had been working to safeguard key tribal, cultural and ecological lands in this region in a piecemeal fashion. But that strategy changed in 2017, when President Donald Trump scaled back three national monuments and voiced his support for industrial development.

"This was a big shift for the whole environmental community," Desai said. "Not only did the Trump administration have a different outlook on public lands use, but we were seeing site-specific threats."

In 2018, Crescent Peak Renewables — the American subsidiary of a Swedish wind power company, Eolus Vind AV — sought to build 248 wind turbines on 32,500 acres of BLM land in southern Clark County. Trump administration officials rejected the proposal, dubbed the Kulling Wind Energy Project.

Crescent Peak tried again last year, seeking access to just 9,300 acres to erect 68 turbines in a scaled-back version of the project. But BLM designated the application as "low priority," effectively killing it.

"If we don't do something, we're going to lose this landscape," said Alan O'Neill, a retired former superintendent for the Lake Mead National Recreation Area who consults for the National Parks Conservation Association.

The Fort Mojave tribe passed a resolution in September 2019 calling for protections of their ancestral lands extending far beyond Spirit Mountain, in a 381,300-acre national monument. By the time Rep. Dina Titus (D-Nev.) introduced a bill supporting the plan this year, the proposed size had expanded to 443,671 acres.

Monument supporters got a boost when Interior laid out a 10-year plan for locally led efforts to restore and conserve the country's lands, water and wildlife in May 2021. The "America the Beautiful" initiative promised to pro-

#### Proposed national monument introduced by Rep. Dina Titus (D-Nev.)

Proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument



Sources: NPCA, OpenStreetMap contributors

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tect 30 percent of the country's lands and waters by 2030.

#### 'Gentle economic growth'

That's when Kim Garrison Means, an artist, curator and college art instructor who lives in Searchlight (population 348), began going door to door to talk to residents about the proposed monument and to find out what it would take for them to support it.

Garrison Means, who lives a mile away from her nearest neighbor, said she talked to nearly everyone in town, making the case that people who loved their rural way of life needed to support this measure.

"It was still pretty covid-y at the time. Some people hadn't seen other humans for quite some time," Garrison Means said. "We did a lot of listening."

She said she found strong support for protecting the land around Searchlight from industrial development. "You don't appreciate what you have until people want to make changes to it."

Although wind and solar companies promise good-paying construction jobs, the Avi Kwa Ame activists contend that having this national monument on their doorstep will welcome what Garrison Means calls "gentle economic growth": businesses related to camping, hunting, birding, hiking, stargazing and other forms of outdoor recreation.

"It was surprising how together our community was," she added. "It didn't matter what flag they were flying outside their house. People wanted to protect this land."