

White House rejects Lombardo's criticism on monument designation

By [Casey Harrison](#) ([contact](#))

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The White House is pushing back at a claim from Nevada Gov. Joe Lombardo that President Joe Biden's administration had not contacted the governor's office about designating Avi Kwa Ame a U.S. national monument.

A White House official said the president's team had long coordinated with members of Nevada's federal delegation. It also coordinated with former Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak's administration. Lombardo defeated Sisolak November's general election and took office in January.

"We initially reached out to the governor's office in January about protecting this tribal site, and our team spoke with the governor's office yesterday as well," the White House wrote in a statement today to the Sun. "DOI (U.S. Department of Interior), CEQ (Council on Environmental Quality), and the White House have also been working with Nevada Tribal state leaders since the Avi Kwa Ame monument was proposed.

"DOI staff traveled to Nevada for meetings with stake holders and state leaders in addition to public meetings. Tribal consultations took place in both Nevada and Arizona. We worked diligently with Nevada government leaders including members of the federal delegation."

Biden on [Tuesday declared more than a half-million acres of federally owned land](#) south of Las Vegas — which spans to state lines with California and Arizona and encompasses nearly all the surrounding land outside Laughlin and Searchlight — would earn protections from development projects in one of the most sweeping federal land conservation efforts in decades.

Shortly after Biden's announcement, Lombardo [sent a release stating the Biden Administration had not responded](#) to "several" concerns raised by the governor.

Lombardo's administration denied the White House's claim that the president's team reached out to the governor. Repeated attempts by Lombardo to speak with Biden were ignored, they said.

Additionally, Lombardo officials were not invited to participate in stakeholder meetings about Avi Kwa Ame, they said.

Lombardo's chief of staff, Ben Kieckhefer, received an email in mid-January from an unknown individual to discuss a topic that did not specifically include Avi Kwa Ame, they said.

There was a brief exchange of emails, but no further follow-up from the White House and no mention of the monument's potential designation, they said.

"No one at the White House reached out to consult Gov. Lombardo specifically about Avi Kwa Ame and no one at the White House responded to Governor Lombardo's repeated attempts to get in contact about this issue," wrote Elizabeth Ray, communications director for Lombardo, in an email to the Sun. "The Biden Administration had no interest in Nevada's position on this issue, and unfortunately they made that very clear."

Lombardo in his statement Tuesday said that the “federal confiscation” of the 506,814 acres for Avi Kwa Ame would jeopardize economic development in the area while making it more difficult for the state to acquire new land for affordable housing. Approximately 85% of the land within Nevada’s borders is federally-owned, including most of the Avi Kwa Ame designation.

In his full statement, Lombardo said:

“Since I took office, the Biden White House has not consulted with my administration about any of the details of the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument which, given the size of the proposal, seems badly out of step. Upon learning that the president was considering unilateral action, I reached out to the White House to raise several concerns, citing the potential for terminal disruption of rare earth mineral mining projects and long-planned, bipartisan economic development efforts. While I’m still waiting for a response, I’m not surprised. This kind of ‘Washington Knows Best’ policy might win plaudits from unaccountable special interests, but it’s going to cost our state jobs and economic opportunity — all while making land more expensive and more difficult to develop for affordable housing and critical infrastructure projects.

“The federal confiscation of 506,814 acres of Nevada land is a historic mistake that will cost Nevadans for generations to come.”

A spokeswoman for the governor did not respond to a request for clarification, including whom Lombardo considered “special interests.”

A tribally led campaign to legally protect Avi Kwa Ame dates to at least 1999, when Spirit Mountain was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as a Traditional Cultural Property. Biden announced at the White House Tribal Nations Summit in December that he would designate Avi Kwa Ame as a national monument.

Avi Kwa Ame’s designation all but halts a proposed 68 wind-turbine farm by Crescent Peak Renewables, though the White House asserts the U.S. Bureau of Land Management has identified more than 9 million acres of public land throughout the state’s borders for solar energy projects.

The BLM is also in the process of reviewing more than three dozen proposed renewable energy projects in the state that could generate up to 13 gigawatts of electricity if constructed. Crescent Peak submitted an application to BLM for the 308-megawatt wind farm, which would have been about nine miles west of Searchlight. Those efforts, however, were generally met with opposition.

Biden is able to declare the site a national monument under authority given to him via the Antiquities Act of 1906.

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