

## **Finding of No Significant Impact for the Environmental Assessment for Jasper County Communications Tower Site**

### **Introduction**

The State of South Carolina proposes to construct a 480-ft guyed tower and associated equipment enclosed by an 80-ft by 80-ft fenced compound. The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Communications Tower Jasper County, South Carolina, dated October 29, 2010, provides an analysis of potential environmental impacts associated with the use of grant funds issued by the Public Safety Interoperable Communications (PSIC) Grant Program, administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce. This EA covers the proposed tower construction and installation of associated equipment.

### **Scope of the Environmental Assessment**

The proposed Jasper County Communications Tower project would apply funds issued by the PSIC Grant Program. The PSIC Grant Program was developed to assist State, local, tribal, and nongovernmental agencies in developing interoperable communications. As a condition of the PSIC Grant Program, grantees must comply with all relevant Federal legislation, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969.

The NTIA has specified that PSIC funds must be used for projects that would improve communications in areas at high risk for natural disasters, in urban and metropolitan areas at high risk for terrorism threats, and should include pre-positioning or securing of interoperable communications for immediate deployment during emergencies or major disasters. Investments receiving PSIC funds can range from installation of new large-scale infrastructure (i.e., towers) to the acquisition of mobile and portable radios. Under the PSIC Grant Program's Programmatic EA (February 2009) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) (April 2009), the Jasper County Communications Tower Site is classified as a transmission and receiving site.

The Jasper County Communications Tower Site would allow for:

- Increased coverage area for Federal, State, and local emergency first responders connected through the Palmetto system;
- Reliable interoperable communications among first responder organizations;
- Updated equipment to support new frequencies to improve and expand voice and data coverage; and
- Enhanced security and facility control.

This EA examines the proposed action to develop a 480-ft guyed communications tower inside an 80-ft by 80-ft fenced compound on Jasper County owned property. Within the compound, a 12-ft by 32-ft prefabricated equipment shelter would house needed electronics and a 40 kilowatt (kW) propane powered generator would provide back-up power to the site during electrical outages. The proposed site would be located in the center of Jasper County, just south of Ridgeland, north of Hardeeville, and west of US Hwy 17. Total ground disturbance for the project would be approximately .15 acres not including site access (.22 acres including site access). The proposed project would tie into the existing power system by extending nearby

overhead power lines to the project site. The project site is accessible through a combination of an existing gravel drive off Okeetee Fire Tower Road and a proposed 360-ft access corridor to reach the fenced perimeter. This EA analyzes existing conditions and environmental consequences of the Proposed Action and two alternatives within eleven major resource areas: noise, air quality, geology and soils, water resources, biological resources, historic and cultural resources, aesthetic and visual resources, land use, infrastructure, socioeconomic resources, and human health and safety.

## **Alternatives Considered**

### **Alternative 1 – Jasper County Tower Site (Preferred Alternative)**

Due to the elevation of the proposed Jasper County Tower site, and the topographic features of the surrounding area, the proposed would provide radio frequency coverage for Jasper County and increased interoperability opportunities for similar sites in the region. This proposed site would provide reliable interoperable communications and significantly increased coverage area for emergency first responders. This alternative proposes to acquire and install a 480-ft guyed communications tower inside an 80-ft by 80-ft fenced compound on Jasper County owned property. Within the compound, a 12-ft by 32-ft prefabricated equipment shelter would house needed electronics and a 40 kW propane powered generator would provide back-up power to the site during electrical outages. Total ground disturbance for the project would be approximately .15 acres not including site access (.22 acres including site access). The site would tie into the existing power system by extending nearby overhead power lines. The project site would be accessible through a combination of an existing gravel drive off Okeetee Fire Tower Road and a proposed 360-ft access corridor to reach the fenced perimeter.

The elevation and topography of the proposed site provides a natural height advantage resulting in enhanced coverage for the proposed 480-ft guyed tower. This site is strategically located in the center of Jasper County, thereby expanding the coverage radius for the County as well as portions of the surrounding counties within South Carolina.

### **No Action Alternative**

The No Action alternative would not meet the current radio system coverage requirements, causing serious limitation on security and emergency responses. Funding for interoperable communications and information systems infrastructure would not be released, and infrastructure would neither be developed nor enhanced. Ongoing maintenance activities would continue using the current funding sources; however, no new activities would be funded with PSIC grant funding. The Proposed Action would not move forward with PSIC funds or any alternate funding sources. The No Action Alternative served as the baseline for assessing the impacts of the alternatives.

### **Alternatives Considered But Not Carried Forward**

Alternative locations were examined to determine the range of reasonable alternatives to implement the Proposed Action. Engineering of the communications system depend on tower location and capabilities of the proposed tower site. Expenses associated with acquiring a new site and the potential impacts to biological, cultural, and physical resources at an undeveloped site were considered. The proposed site located on existing County-owned property provides a

technically appropriate area to locate this facility. Within this area, an extremely limited number of sites were available from which to pursue.

Consideration of existing tower locations in the area and accounting for the future needs of Jasper County and surrounding areas did not meet the pre-screen requirements of: increased coverage area for emergency responders, new technology that supports frequencies which improve/expand voice and/or data coverage, improved communications among security/emergency organizations, enhanced security and facility control, and use of cost-effective measures via leasing agreements and systems sharing. Therefore, these alternative locations were considered but not carried forward.

### **Recommended Alternative**

Alternative 1 (Preferred Alternative) to implement the Jasper County Tower Site is recommended for implementation and best meets the purpose and the need to strengthen the overall local and regional communications capabilities by constructing a 480-ft guyed tower and associated equipment enclosed by an 80-ft by 80-ft fenced compound. The No Action Alternative would not address the need for current radio system coverage in Jasper County.

### **Consultations**

Coordination on fish and wildlife issues to meet Section 7 requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was accomplished through a preliminary review of endangered species using the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Division of Endangered Species website to identify listed and proposed threatened and endangered species, as well as critical habitats that may be located on or near the proposed site. Species federally listed in Jasper County include: one mammal species (*West Indian manatee*); four bird species (*Bald eagle*, *Red-cockaded woodpecker*, *Wood stork*, *Piping plover*); five reptiles species (*Eastern indigo snake*, *Kemp's ridley sea turtle*, *Leatherback sea turtle*, *Loggerhead sea turtle*, *Green sea turtle*); one amphibian species (*Flatwoods salamander*); one fish species (*Shortnose sturgeon*); and three plant species (*Pondbeny*, *Canby's dropwort*, *American chaffseed*). Habitats for these species were compared to the habitat observed at the proposed site, and none of the habitats were identified with a potential to be found on the site. The USFWS indicated in a letter dated March 18, 2009, that is not likely to adversely affect federally listed threatened and endangered species, however, based on the description of the tower design characteristics, the USFWS cannot conclude that the tower design would likely minimize the potential hazard to avian species protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) due to the use of guyed wires and the height of the tower being over 200 feet. The USFWS noted concerns regarding the potential impact of the tower on migratory birds and recommended guidelines for the use of white strobe lights to minimize bird strike fatalities, especially at night. Variables such as structure height, design, lighting, seasons, adjacent land features, and migratory patterns would affect the potential and degree of adverse impacts on migratory birds. The potential impact of the tower on migratory birds would be mitigated using the recommended USFWS guidelines for lighting and marking to minimize bird strike fatalities.

Coordination on historic and cultural resources issues was accomplished through consultation with both the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Jasper County Historical Society to determine whether the construction of the proposed project may generate any short- or long-term indirect impacts to historic and cultural resources and may be located

within the viewshed of any historic and cultural resources. The construction of the proposed tower may indirectly impact the viewshed of architectural resources in the area if it is not aesthetically compatible with the character of the historic surroundings. The proposed project is located in an undeveloped woodland area owned by Jasper County in central South Carolina with no structures located in the area. A literature review and field assessment were conducted and submitted with the FCC Form 620 Submission Packet. The Submission Packet reported there would be no adverse effect on historic properties within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) for direct effects and no historic properties within the APE for visual effects. The report was submitted to the South Carolina Department of Archives & History (SHPO) for review. The South Carolina SHPO's reply dated March 19, 2009 concurred that identified archaeological site 38JA 1052 does not meet the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places. Based on the documentation contained in the Submission Packet, the South Carolina SHPO concurred there would be no historic properties affected in the area of potential effects for direct and visual effects. A public notice was published in the Jasper County Sun on February 18 and 25, and March 4, 2009 to allow for public comments related to the proposed project on historic properties within the viewshed of the proposed tower; no comments were received.

Additional coordination included outreach to Native American Tribes and to the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Native American Tribes were notified through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Tower Construction Notification System (TCNS) in February 2009 to request a determination whether the proposed project would affect any religious or archeological sites in the vicinity of the project site to the following tribal organizations: Shawnee Tribe, Eastern Shawnee Tribe, Tuscarora Nation, Seminole Tribe for Florida, Cherokee Nation, Thlopthlocco Tribal Town, and the Catawba Indian Nation. Responses from the Tribes listed above did not indicate any issues with the proposed project. Consultations with the seven Tribes indicated concurrence that no known historical or archaeological properties would be impacted.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The Proposed Action is not likely to result in any environmental impacts and does not involve any unusual risks or impacts to sensitive areas. The Proposed Action would require construction of a new transmitting and receiving 480-ft guyed tower and associated equipment enclosed by an 80-ft by 80-ft fenced compound with ground disturbance activities of 0.22 acres. In accordance with 47 Code of Federal Regulations Section 1.1307 (a) (1) through (8), an evaluation was made to determine whether any of the listed FCC special interest items would be significantly affected if a tower structure and associated equipment were constructed at the proposed site location. No FCC special interest items were identified.

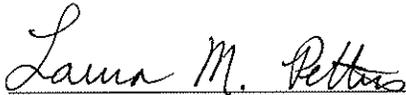
### **NTIA Review**

NTIA determined that the October 2010 EA for the Proposed Communications Tower in Jasper County, South Carolina adequately assessed the potential individual and cumulative environmental impacts of the proposed telecommunications facility development including a 480-ft guyed telecommunications tower and that the scope, alternatives considered, and content of the EA are adequate.

This FONSI is based on the attached EA which has been independently evaluated by the NTIA and determined to adequately and accurately addresses the environmental issues and impacts of the proposed project. The EA provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining that an environmental impact statement is not required.

Based on the best available information and NTIA's independent review, NTIA has decided to adopt the October 2010 EA for the Proposed Communications Tower in Jasper County, South Carolina. The EA is available for public review at <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/psic/>. This FONSI has therefore been prepared and is being submitted to document environmental review and evaluation in compliance with the NEPA of 1969. The decision documents for the environmental review of the Proposed Action are attached.

I have considered the information contained in the EA, which is the basis for this FONSI. Based on the information in the EA and this FONSI document, I agree that the Proposed Action as described above, and in the EA, would have no significant impact on the environment.



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Laura M. Pettus  
Responsible Program Manager  
Department of Commerce  
National Telecommunications and Information Administration

1/17/11  
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Date