

Finding of No Significant Impact for the Environmental Assessment for the Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease

Introduction

The State of Florida proposes to construct a 300 foot (ft) monopole tower and associated equipment within a 75-ft by 75-ft fenced compound. The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease, dated June 2011, 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 Okeechobee 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 Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease site is classified as a transmission and receiving site.

The Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease site would allow for:

- Increased coverage area for Federal, State, and local emergency first responders connected through the Statewide Law Enforcement Radio System (SLERS) 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 300-ft monopole communications tower inside a 130-ft by 130-ft area on Okeechobee Utility Authority owned property. Of the total area, a 75-ft by 75-ft area would be enclosed by a fence. Within the fenced compound, a 12-ft by 26-ft prefabricated equipment shelter would house needed electronics and a diesel powered generator with 1,000 gallon fuel supply tank to provide back-up power to the site during electrical outages. The proposed site would be located in the south of Okeechobee County, just south of the town of Okeechobee, and north of Lake Okeechobee and 539-ft east of SW 16th Avenue. Total ground disturbance for the project would be approximately 0.38 acres.

Ground disturbance is not necessary for site access due to an existing 0.21 mile dirt path extending from SW 16th Avenue to a nearby existing communications site. All temporary construction disturbances would be contained within the 130-ft by 130-ft designated area. The proposed project would tie into the existing power and telephone system by extending nearby overhead power lines from the SW 16th Avenue access point to the project site. This EA analyzes existing conditions and environmental consequences of the Proposed Action and three 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, and human health and safety.

Alternatives

Alternative 4 (Preferred Alternative)

Alternative 4, located on the 5125 SW 16th Avenue property, would construct a 300-ft monopole communications tower inside a 130-ft by 130-ft area within a 66 acre lot owned by the Okeechobee Utility Authority. Of the total area, a 75-ft by 75-ft area would be enclosed by a fence securing a 12-ft by 26-ft prefabricated equipment shelter and a diesel powered generator with 1,000 gallon fuel supply tank. Total ground disturbance for the project would be approximately 0.38 acres, with site access already in place for a nearby communications site. The preferred Alternative 4 site was chosen based on ease of access and nearby availability of utilities. The site boundaries were adjusted to avoid impacts on the wetland area situated north of this site.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the current emergency services radio system coverage would not be met causing serious limitation on emergency response, funding for interoperable communications and information systems infrastructure would not be released, and infrastructure would neither be developed nor enhanced. The No Action Alternative would not meet the needs of the current radio system coverage requirements and would result continued limitation of security and emergency response capabilities. The Proposed Action would not move forward using PSIC grant funds or any alternate funding sources. The No Action Alternative served as the baseline for assessing the impacts of the alternatives in the EA.

Alternatives Considered but not Carried Forward

Alternative 1

The Alternative 1 site, situated on the west side of SW 16th Avenue directly across from the preferred site, is owned by the South Florida Water Management District. Historic and recent aerial views indicate the surrounding property was used to store dredging material from Lake Okeechobee and associated canals. Therefore, only a limited area was available for construction of a tower and shelter. In addition, utilities were not readily available and over ¼ mile of easement would have to be secured for utilities only. Finally, much of the property was classified as wetlands. These factors taken into consideration resulted in the elimination of the Alternative 1 site.

Alternatives 2 and 3

Alternative sites 2 and 3 are both located on the 5125 SW 16th Avenue property owned by the Okeechobee Utility Authority and contains approximately 66 acres. The Alternative 2 site was

situated in the southeastern corner area of the property. This site failed the tower fall radius as being too close to a private residence, and was eliminated. The Alternative 3 site was situated in the central area of the property approximately 200 feet northwest of the Utility's percolation pond. At this location, utilities were not readily available to this location. Based on the construction costs of access roads and utilities and the proximity to the percolation pond, this site was eliminated.

Preferred Alternative

Alternative 4 (Preferred Alternative) to construct the Okeechobee 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 300-ft monopole tower and associated equipment enclosed by a 75-ft by 75-ft fenced compound. The other alternatives would not address the need for current radio system coverage in Okeechobee 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 lists and the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) to identify listed and proposed threatened and endangered species, as well as critical habitats that may be located on or near the proposed site. Eight species are federally listed in Okeechobee County including: bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Audubon's crested caracara (*Polyborus plancus*), wood stork (*Mycteria americana*), red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), Florida scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*), Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*), everglade snail kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeus*), and eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*). Habitats for these species were also obtained from FNAI to determine if a given habitat appeared to correspond to habitats located on the subject property. Three species (Crested Caracara, Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, Snail Kite) have designated consultation areas that overlap the proposed site. No species however, have critical habitat overlapping the proposed project site. To ensure there would be no impacts to the protected species, a written request for *Confirmation of No Significant Impact for the proposed construction of the Okeechobee Communication Tower* was submitted on February 22, 2011 to the USFWS. As of June 1, 2011, the USFWS had not provided a response.

Coordination on historic and cultural resources issues was accomplished through consultation with the Florida State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to determine whether the construction of the proposed project may generate any short- or long-term indirect impacts to 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 pasture area owned by Okeechobee Utility Authority in central Florida with several other communication towers located in the area. A literature review and field assessment were conducted and submitted with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Form 620 Submission Packet to the Florida SHPO. The Submission Packet reported that a field visit to the site failed to reveal any cultural resources during the pedestrian inspection of the impact area nor within the four shovel tests placed at the proposed tower's perimeter. An archaeological

evaluation was undertaken concluding that no archaeological resources eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places would be impacted. A survey of surrounding properties found nine structures within the 0.75 mile area of potential effect (APE) over 50 years old, however, only one had the potential to be on the National Register of Historic Places. Herbert Hoover Dike (80B244) located approximately 0.60 miles southeast of the proposed site is potentially eligible for the National Register, but has not been evaluated by the Florida SHPO. Due to the distance from the tower and the dense trees in between the tower and the dike, the tower would have no adverse visual effect on this potential historic resource. The proposed communications tower and fenced area would not directly impact any Nationally Registered or potentially eligible Historic Resources.

The appropriate Tribal Historic Preservation Officers of the federally recognized Native American tribes with known ancestral rights to Okeechobee County were consulted on November 5, 2010 using the FCC Tower Construction Notification System (TCNS). Additional coordination included outreach to the National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida requested more information but did not object to the proposed project.

A response from the Florida SHPO was received via the TCNS on January 11, 2011 stating their concurrence with "No Historic Properties in Area of Potential Effects (APE) Visual Effect: No Adverse Effect on Historic Properties in APE".

Due to the presence of an existing 0.01 acres Wet Prairie wetland in the northwest corner of the proposed site, consultation with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection was held. A permit (#47-0301441-001) was received to fill in the 0.01 acre wetland without requiring mitigation measures since there was no ecological value or connection to other wetlands.

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 300-ft monopole tower and associated equipment enclosed by a 75-ft by 75-ft fenced compound with ground disturbance activities of 0.38 acres. In compliance with NEPA, the proposed project was evaluated for impacts on 11 resource areas. In accordance with 47 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 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 control cabinets were constructed at the proposed site location. No FCC special interest items were identified.

NTIA Review

NTIA determined that the June 2011 Environmental Assessment for the Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease adequately assessed the potential individual and cumulative environmental impacts of the proposed telecommunications facility development including a 300-ft monopole 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 address 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 June 2011 EA for the Proposed Communications Tower in Okeechobee, Florida. The EA is available for public review at http://www.ntia.doc.gov/psic/NEPA_sub3.html. This FONSI has therefore been prepared and is being submitted to document environmental review and evaluation in compliance with NEPA. 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.

Laura M. Pettus

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Responsible Program Manager

Department of Commerce

National Telecommunications and Information Administration

7/27/11
Date

ADOPTION OF EXISTING ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT

Title of Document being Adopted: Proposed Okeechobee Communications Tower Lease

Proponent: Okeechobee County, Florida

Location of current proposal: 5125 SW 16th Avenue, Okeechobee, Florida

Agency that prepared document being adopted: Okeechobee County

Date adopted document was prepared: July 17, 2011

Description of document (or portion) being adopted: The proposed tower project in Okeechobee County is to construct a 300-foot (ft) monopole communications tower inside an 75-ft by 75-ft fenced compound. Within the fenced compound, a 12-ft by 26-ft prefabricated equipment shelter would house needed electronics and a diesel powered generator with a 1,000 gallon fuel supply tank would provide back-up power to the site during electrical outages. Total ground disturbance for the project would be approximately 0.38 acres. All temporary construction disturbances would be contained within a 130-ft by 130-ft designated area. The proposed project would tie into the existing power and telephone system by extending nearby overhead power lines from the SW 16th Avenue access point to the project site. The tower and site construction and equipment acquisition and installation for this proposed project does not have any significant environmental impacts or extraordinary circumstances.

The document is available to be read at: http://www.ntia.doc.gov/psic/NEPA_sub3.html

The Department of Commerce has identified and adopted this document as being appropriate for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) purposes after under the independent review. The document meets its environmental review needs for approval PSIC Grant Program and will accompany the proposal to the decision maker.

Name of agency adopting the document: NTIA

Responsible Official: Laura M. Pettus

Position/Title: Responsible Program Manager

Address: NTIA, Room 4812, 1401 Constitution Avenue, NW,
Washington, D.C. 20230

Contact: Laura Pettus

Phone: (202) 482-4509

Fax: (202) 501-8013

e-mail: lpettus@ntia.doc.gov

Signed:

Date:

Laura M. Pettus

7/27/11