

Briefing Statement

Bureau: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Issue: Consideration OF Proposed Cell Phone Towers
Park Site: Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Date: January 27, 2010

BACKGROUND: In April 2004 representatives of Cingular Wireless Telecommunications approached Park managers inquiring as to the feasibility of allowing them to erect 120 to 170 foot tall cell phone towers at one or more of three suggested locations in the national park. All three sites were proposed to be located near the Park's most popular road, Newfound Gap Road (U.S. 441), with one site at the TN/NC state line at Newfound Gap Parking Area and the other two within 15 miles further south into North Carolina. The Smokies has no cell towers within its boundaries at present.

Under legal requirements of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, managers of federally owned lands have a responsibility to consider allowing placement of wireless equipment on public lands. This consideration must be done in the context of all the existing laws and policies and missions that guide that agency. The Act and Director's Order 53A also require that managers consider the possible advantages of improved communications, particularly in terms of reporting emergencies.

Word of the proposed towers reached area conservation groups and the media in both states who have described the proposal in terms including "preposterous", "outrageous" and "insane". Comments have been very critical of the visual impacts of cell towers, the commercialization of the Park, and the precedent for tower requests elsewhere in the Smokies.

CURRENT STATUS: At a preliminary meeting with Cingular, Park representatives described the Park's concerns regarding clearing, grading, extending utilities and visual quality. At that first meeting the concept of the three tall, freestanding towers was shelved by mutual agreement. As an alternative, Cingular planned to examine the technical feasibility of improving their coverage by adding less obtrusive antennas to some existing Park utility infrastructure including power poles. No firm timetable was projected for the next discussion, and no subsequent proposals have been received from either Cingular or any other cell service provider.

In the event that any future cell tower requests are received the Park superintendent will review the proposal and decide whether to deny the request or begin consideration through the public decision process required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

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