

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the
Horn Mountain Communication Tower Project

September 2014

USDA Forest Service
Southern Region
Talladega National Forest
Talladega Ranger District
Talladega County, Alabama

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

- The construction of a 60-100 foot self-supporting steel communication tower, which will meet current safety standards at the Horn Mountain designated communications site T20S R5E, Section 12, is necessary to fulfill communication needs for the Forest Service, Alabama Forestry Commission and permittees. This action is needed because clear communications are essential for the safety of Forest Service employees and the public as they are involved in daily activities which include firefighting, tree felling and other hazardous duties. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the 2004 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the National Forests in Alabama (NFA), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan. All administrative sites and facilities will effectively and safely serve the public and accommodate the work force. Direction provided by the Forest Plan which support this proposal is:

5.B. Designated Communications/Electronic Sites

- These designated areas are managed to minimize adverse impact on other resources.
- Where possible, existing sites are expanded as needed rather than creating additional areas.
- New equipment should be as inconspicuous to the surrounding terrain as possible.
- These areas are managed to retain low-growing vegetation, which conforms to the safe-operating requirements of the utility and which reduces surface water runoff and erosion.
- Recreation is discouraged at these sites.

Goal 30

Manage areas with special paleontological, culture, or heritage characteristics to maintain or restore those characteristics.

Standards

FW-113 – Protection of firefighters and the public is the first priority in all fire management actions.

FW-148 – Coordinate inventory, evaluation, nomination, protection, enhancement, and interpretation procedures with the Alabama State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) as necessary before project decisions.

FW-149 – All coordination relating to the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and its implementing regulations (36 CFR 800) will also tier to any programmatic agreements, MOUs, MOAs or other agreements between the Forest and SHPO.

The area under proposal for the erection of a new communication tower was landscaped by the U.S. Forest Service from 1936-1938 as the location for the Horn Mountain Fire Tower. The fire tower on site currently houses the communication antenna but has been deemed a safety concern due to being inadequate structurally for placing antennas on it. Implementation of the proposed action of erecting the tower will insure continued communications which should provide for the safety of employees, both federal and state, and the public. The Forest Service antenna currently mounted to the fire tower will not be replaced if damaged due to concerns with climbing and working off the fire tower in its current condition. Tests have been conducted by placing an antenna at 20 feet in height near the base of the tower and communications were severely diminished due to reduced coverage. A structurally sound tower at least 60 feet tall in this location is critical for communications on the south end of the Talladega Ranger District. Communications in this area are necessary to ensure the safety of the district employees and the local community due to poor to non-existent cell phone coverage over large portions of the Talladega Ranger District. This environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of alternatives to meet this need.

Decision

Based upon my careful examination of potential impacts of the activities analyzed in the EA, I have decided to implement Alternative 1 with the following proposed activities.

a) Clearing of approximately 10 trees and associated underbrush and shrubs.

The action area of the project is estimated to be 0.25 acres with a dominant white pine over-story which is outside its' natural range in Alabama. A seven foot square by six foot deep concrete pad will be constructed. However if bedrock is encountered, the surface width of the pad will increase.

b) Construct a new communications tower and a security fence around the new tower.

A 60 to 100 foot self-supporting tower with a 24" triangular base which will meet current safety standards will be constructed. The bottom 60 feet of a 100 foot tower is planned for placement however the tower height may be increased if communications are impaired. Chain link fencing will secure the tower. The

existing power pole will be moved or replaced so it is outside the fence and will be located in the existing right-of-way.

c) Remodel the current existing control room and use for the new tower.

The existing communications control room should be adequate for use when remodeled.

d) Establish a Mitigation Plan thru a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the NFA, Alabama Historical Commission, CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) Legacy, and the Forest Fire Lookout Association (FFLA). The MOA will consist of the following:

1.) The National Forests in Alabama shall document the Horn Mountain Fire Tower Complex in accordance with the Historic American Building Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Level III Standards. This documentation will begin in Fiscal Year 2015 after an IDIQ Contractor selection process.

2.) After the installation of the new communications tower a cooperative effort between the NFA and the FFLA will secure funding for a partial restoration of the original Horn Mountain Fire Tower starting with the refurbishment of the stair treads. This partial restoration will begin during Fiscal Year 2015 in conjunction with the Passport in Time project to better utilize volunteer, contractor, and district staff labor.

3.) Further partial restoration of the fire tower site will be proper prep and repainting of the fire tower, removing the unneeded antennae and cables, and stabilizing the masonry overlooks. Work will begin during Fiscal Year 2015 as funding is procured, and will continue during the fiscal year(s). Due to the amount of funding required within this stipulation (as of July 2014 it is projected to be over \$50,000), this part of the process may take multiple fiscal years to complete, but will be completed no later than the end of Fiscal Year 2018.

4.) Placing on the U.S. Forest Service Passport in Time Schedule a field school project that would utilize volunteer labor in the initial restoration effort declared in Stipulation 2. The Horn Mountain Tower Site will be placed on the PIT list during Fiscal Year 2015 so as to coincide with the actual work that is under planning within Stipulation 3.

5.) Begin the nomination process to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage of the potentially eligible Horn Mountain Fire Tower Complex during Fiscal Year 2015.

6.) Illustrate the role of forest lookout towers within the history of fire prevention and forest safety throughout the state. The NFA will achieve this through the use of interpretive signing to be placed at the Talladega National Forest, Talladega Ranger District Office during Fiscal Year 2015. Design will be a collaborative effort between the NFA, the MOA signatories, and a design firm selected through the IDIQ contracting process.

7.) Prepare a short publication about the role of African-American CCC enrollees and send it to a journal of popular consumption such as Alabama Heritage during Fiscal Year 2015.

Other Alternatives Considered

There were no other alternatives that were considered in detail. The following alternatives were considered but eliminated from detail analysis.

1. Restoring the Horn Mountain Fire Tower and creating a platform so telecommunication employees would be safer and secure for putting up antennas. There was uncertainty about the stability of the platform and the safety associated with using them. Also this alternative had many unknown costs.
2. Put the new tower about 75 feet south of Horn Mountain Fire tower. This would mean a new building must be constructed, power moved since it should not be run underground for that distance due to the possibility of rock obstructions. A Mitigation Plan would still need to be done.
3. Place a new telecommunications tower adjacent to the American Tower (north of Horn tower) which is not a designated communications site in the Forest Plan. We would need a building, electricity, fence and an amendment to the forest plan.
4. Use the Emergency Management System tower at Bulls Gap (off 600M, south of Horn tower) which is an existing communications site in the Forest Plan. This tower is about 60 feet tall and per communication technicians would not provide the needed coverage since the elevation is much lower and the orientation is not good.
5. Use the Microwave Tower on Rebecca Mountain which is not a communications site in the Forest Plan and would not provide coverage needed; the east side of Horn Mountain would be totally blocked.
6. Use the location approved by SHPO in the 1996 16th amendment to the Forest Plan about 250 feet SW of Horn Tower. This is not currently part of a communications site and would require a forest plan amendment. We would need a building, electricity and a fence and the tower would probably be 200 foot or much taller.
7. Use the location about 100-150 feet SW of Horn tower where Talladega County Emergency Management Agency wanted to put a tower in 2009. Currently part of the communications site. We would need a building, moved electricity and a fence. The tower would need to be at least 100⁺ feet tall or larger since it is at lower elevation than Horn Mountain Fire Tower.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Based on the analysis presented in the *Horn Mountain Communication Tower EA*, I have decided to select Alternative 1 because it best meets the purpose and need and the Forest-wide Goals discussed below. The following is the rationale for my decision.

I eliminated the No Action Alternative since it failed to meet the purpose and need established for the project. The No Action Alternative does not address or provide a solution for improving communications and addressing associated safety concerns.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) meets the guidelines set forth in the Forest Plan (5.B. Designated Communications/Electronic Sites, Goal 30, Standards, FW113, FW-148, and FW-149).

Implementation of the proposed action of erecting a new tower will insure continued communications which should provide for the safety of employees, both federal and state, and the public. A structurally sound tower at least 60 feet tall in this location is critical for continued communications on the Talladega Ranger District particularly if the current antenna fails.

Public Involvement

Notice of and opportunity for public input and comment on the proposed action was provided by the following:

- (1) The Horn Mountain Communication Tower EA has been on the Talladega Ranger District's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the last quarter. The SOPA is published and updated quarterly on the National Forests in Alabama website.
- (2) A scoping notice was mailed out on June 28th to district mailing list and ended on July 8, 2013. No comments were received during the scoping period as defined by 36 CFR 218.
- (3) A legal notice of the Request for Comments for the Horn Mountain Communication tower and draft Decision Notice was published in The Daily Home on August 14, 2013.
- (4) The draft EA was made available at the district office for public review.

No public comments were received. The MOA is part of the analysis file and is to mitigate potentially adverse effects to Horn Mountain Fire Tower.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse as described in the EA. The direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the proposed action on telecommunication services, botany, wildlife, human health and safety, heritage, and recreation under the forest plan were analyzed and discussed in the EA for significance. No significant environmental effects were determined to be likely as a result of the proposed action. Adverse effects to heritage resources will be mitigated as described in more detail below. My finding is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action. However reliable communications are imperative to safety.
2. The entire purpose of this planned action is to provide for improved public health and safety (EA page 5). The construction of the new telecommunications tower would improve human health and safety by providing a more reliable public safety communication system. There would be a positive impact by implementing this action but the significance is hard to determine since we cannot know what accidents may have been prevented by implementing the planned action.
3. There are no wilderness study areas, floodplains, wild or scenic rivers or wetlands identified in the project area. No new archeological resources were identified during the surveys of the project area. Also there are no known threatened and endangered species. The known archaeological resource, Horn Mountain Fire Tower, is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and we are in consultation with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) to mitigate any adverse effects with a MOA. Therefore within the limited context of the planned actions along with the project design criteria, there will be no significant effect on any unique characteristics or features of the geographic area. (EA page 6)
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial, because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (EA page 6). The overall use of the communication site will not change when the proposed action is implemented.
5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. Possible effects on the human environment are generally known and well understood. The construction techniques will meet industry standards and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. The potential adverse effects from construction of the new telecommunications tower on the historic fire tower will be mitigated through a MOA created in consultation with the ACHP and other interested groups. Maintenance of existing facilities will be part of the MOA. This action should provide a positive precedent for future actions in areas that contain a historical fire tower.
7. The possible cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration for past and reasonably foreseeable future activities on adjacent private and public lands. Each environmental component includes consideration of cumulative effects. The context and intensity of cumulative impacts over space and time will not be significant (EA page 7).
8. We are consulting with the ACHP and other interested groups to mitigate any adverse effects to the National Register of Historic Places eligible Horn Mountain Fire Tower so there will be no loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. SHPO concurrence and 106 consultations are completed.
9. Implementing this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends toward Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act. There are no federally designated critical habitats for endangered species within the project area. This determination is based on site-specific surveys and the Biological Evaluation for the Horn Mountain Communication Tower EA (Project File).
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama. (See EA, page 19)

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

National Forest Management Act

This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 regarding the effective management, use, and protection of the natural resources of the area affected by this project, and is consistent with the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama, January 2004.

Administrative Review Opportunities and Implementation

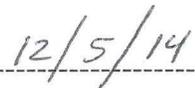
Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.24, two opportunities were provided to comment on this project and no comments were received. Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.4 this decision is not subject to objection. This project may be implemented immediately upon publication of the Notice of Decision in the newspaper of record.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Gloria Nielsen, District Ranger, Talladega National Forest, 1001 North Street, Talladega, Alabama 35160 (telephone: 256-362-2909 ext. 121 or email: glorianielsen@fs.fed.us)

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GLORIA R. NIELSEN
District Ranger
Talladega Ranger District

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Date

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