



File Code: 1950

Date: May 28, 2013

Dear Interested Citizen,

The James River Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests is beginning the environmental analysis process for a proposal to authorize the construction and operation of a cellular communications site. The proposed project area is located on Brushy Mountain, northeast of Longdale Furnace in Alleghany County, adjacent to the Rockbridge County line near State Route 850 (US 60) and Interstate 64 (see Vicinity map). Utilities needed to support the site include a fiber optic line and an electric service line, both of which would be installed primarily underground along SR 850. The purpose of this new site is to provide needed communication capabilities for public health and safety services within a six mile interstate corridor and surrounding area.

A. General Description of the Area

The general area is located between Brushy Mountain and North Mountain in the Brattons Run area. The elevation of the area ranges between 2,420 feet at Interstate 64 (approximately 0.10 miles due east of the site) to 3,280 feet at the top of Brushy Mountain and 3,300 feet at the top of North Mountain.

Rich Hole Wilderness lies in close proximity to the west of the proposed facility but there are no activities associated with the proposal within the wilderness itself. An existing high voltage transmission line forms the eastern border of the Rich Hole Wilderness and the proposed facility would lie between the power line and SR 850 (see Site Schematic map).

B. Proposed Action

The Forest Service has received a Special Use application from Verizon to construct a tower and associated support utilities and structures. The proposed action is to permit the construction and authorize the use for operation and maintenance. The following activities include (see Project maps):

- Construction of a 178' monopole tower that will also allow for collocation of other users, such as county governments and other wireless carriers. The tower height is below the FAA requirement for lighting so it will not be lighted.
- Construction of three 12'x20' adjacent equipment shelters on concrete piers (all under one roof) for a total size of 36'x20', within a fenced 50'x60' area (0.069 acre).
- Construction of a fenced propane tank enclosure area (approximately 10' x 17') to enclose a multiple-use propane generator on a concrete pad.
- Construction of three retaining walls (8-9' tall) around the equipment compound and propane tank enclosure.
- Improvement of the horizontal alignment and surface of Forest Service Road 3525 from SR 850 to the proposed site (approximately 325 feet) and authorization for the use of this road to access the site.



- Installation of an underground fiber optic line from Longdale Furnace to the entrance of the proposed facility. The cable would be installed along the east side of SR 850 to the site entrance where it would meet the electric line before going under SR 850 to the site. The line would be buried close to the road shoulder except for the possibility of a short aerial section traversing a stream between two poles near Longdale Furnace. The total length of the fiber optic line is approximately 4.8 miles.
- Installation of an underground electric line from a private tract northeast of the proposed communication site to the intersection of the fiber optic line. The line would be buried along the east side of SR 850 for a total length of approximately 1.6 miles before going under SR 850 to the site.
- Temporary use of the Rich Hole Trail (Forest Service Trail 464) parking area for staging materials if necessary. However, parking for two vehicles will be left at all times.
- Amending the 1993 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Plan) for the George Washington National Forest with a non-significant amendment. Cell tower facilities are considered communications sites and are allocated to Management Area 20 in the 1993 Plan with management direction developed specifically for these types of areas. The location of this proposed tower location is not currently within an approved communication site so the 1993 Plan would need to be amended to change the land allocation. The 1993 Plan has been undergoing revision since 2007 and it is anticipated that a new Plan will be issued sometime in 2013. If the new Plan becomes effective before the decision is made for this particular project, the new Plan is expected to identify this site as an approved communication site where communication facilities could be developed and the environmental analysis for the tower will focus on the effects of the construction of the facility and associated activities. If the new Plan is not yet in effect at the time the decision for this project is made, the analysis and project decision will also include an amendment to the 1993 Plan.

C. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The cellular tower proposal is needed to rectify the lack of cellular service coverage within a six mile zone along the I-64 corridor that is heavily influenced by the surrounding terrain of Brushy and North Mountains. Both Allegheny and Rockbridge Counties have experienced difficulty maintaining or establishing public safety communications in this area. The lack of service has been demonstrated to affect emergency responses and communication by area emergency management service offices. The Boards of Supervisors in both counties have issued resolutions in support of this project. The proposed site will provide reliable, state-of-the-art wireless voice, data and broadband service along with access to E-911 to local residents, businesses and interstate travelers. This project would support the 1996 Telecommunications Act (47 USC 332).

D. Scope of the Analysis

The 1993 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Forest Plan will be tiered to and will initially guide this analysis. Together with the 1993 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Plan), these documents provide the programmatic, or first level of the two level decision process adopted by the Forest Service. The second level is the site-specific environmental analysis. However, if the new Final Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (anticipated in 2013) becomes effective before the decision for this project is made, the analysis will be tiered to the new FEIS and the project will be consistent with the new Plan. The FEIS and Plan documents are available for review at the George

Washington and Jefferson National Forests Supervisor's Office, 5162 Valleypointe Parkway, Roanoke, VA 24019 or the James Ranger District Office, 810A East Madison Avenue, Covington, VA 24426.

Management activities are guided by both forestwide and specific management area direction in the Plan. The proposed cell tower site is within the Scenic Corridors and the Highlands Scenic Tour management area – MA 7 (1993 Plan p. 3-29). Interstate 64 in this area is listed as a scenic corridor with a VQO of Retention (Table 3-3, Plan p. 3-30).

The Issues: Aesthetics section the Plan states; “Management Areas 5 and 7, in particular corridors along scenic routes, are managed to emphasize visual resource objectives.” Management Standards for Scenic Corridors state: “Adherence to the following standards is required when implementing the Plan in Scenic Corridors.”

- 7-3. Seek opportunities to screen or minimize visual impacts of utility corridors and support towers. (p. 3-31)
- 7-11. New special uses are issued only when there is an over-riding demonstrated public need or benefit. (p. 3-32)
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Common standards for Aesthetics (pp. 3-119 to 3-121) for Management Area 7:

- Q – Utility rights of way are located and maintained to conform with natural patterns or vegetation.
- R – Overhead utility lines and support towers are screened where possible.

Common standards – Special Uses and Access Easements (p. 3-149):

- 236. Each new request is evaluated on a case-by-case basis for consistency with the management area objectives and public need.
- 237. Authorizations are not granted when suitable alternative facilities can be secured.
- 238. Expanded use of existing facilities is preferred over development of new facilities.

The 1993 FEIS recognizes the difficulty of locating utility corridors and communication sites:

- “In all alternatives, utility corridors present a marked contrast in line, form, and texture to the natural landscape. These contrasts are mitigated to the extent practical.” (FEIS, p. 3-143)
- “Developed recreation areas, administrative sites, and communications sites also contrast with the surrounding landscape. These are rehabilitated, designed, and constructed under all alternatives to the extent feasible in a manner that minimizes contrasts and harmonize with the natural environment. (FEIS p. 3-143)

E. Decision to be Made

The Forest Supervisor will make the decision. The decision to be made is whether or not to implement this proposed action in this area. If so, what are the most appropriate construction and maintenance standards and what modifications or mitigations are needed to address potential impacts?

F. Tentative Alternatives

The following two alternatives were developed while considering the purpose and need for the action, existing data, and Forest Plan direction and will be evaluated in the environmental analysis. The proposed action alternative may be modified or other alternatives may be added based on responses to this request for input and the effects analysis conducted during preparation of the environmental analysis.

Alternative 1 (No Action) - The proposal is not approved, the tower would not be built, the road not realigned, and supporting utilities not installed. Current conditions would remain the same.

Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) – This is the proposed action as detailed in this document.

Four alternatives were considered but eliminated from further study.

1. Collocation with an existing high voltage electric transmission lattice tower (86 foot) within the adjacent utility corridor. This alternative was not acceptable to the owner and operator of the transmission tower and line due to technical concerns.

2. Collocation at an existing Forest Service communication site on North Mountain, approximately 3.5 miles south of the proposed location. Due to location and surrounding terrain, the existing site would still not adequately address the gap in coverage currently experienced along I-64 and SR 850 in the eastern section of Alleghany County and in the western section of Rockbridge County and would not provide as much coverage in the southern area of Brattons Run as would the proposed location.

3. Private land location on North Mountain, approximately 1.8 miles south of the proposed location. Due to terrain, much of the I-64 area to the north would still be blocked. Radio signals could interfere with the operations of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO) in Green Bank, West Virginia.

4. Private land location in Rockbridge County. Due to location and surrounding terrain, this site would not provide adequate height to support the network design due to a county ordinance.

G. Tentative Issues

Due to the tower height and its proximity to Interstate 64, State Route 850, the Highlands Scenic Tour and Rich Hole Wilderness, the potential impacts to scenery are already an identified issue. A visual impacts analysis by the Forest Service has identified the following findings (see Photos).

The landscape character currently viewed from Rich Hole Wilderness trailhead is a predominately forest and steeply sloping landscape with an existing power line that crosses directly overhead roughly north to south with two associated power line support towers being clearly evident. The Rich Hole Trail curves out of the parking area, quickly taking trail users into the Wilderness away from these man-made features, although sounds from the road may be heard until the trail users cross over the ridge of Brushy Mountain.

A drive to the top of the Highlands Scenic Tour on FS Road 447 and hikes on the Cockscomb and the Knoll Wayside Trails resulted in a determination that the proposed project site is not visible from this road or its associated viewpoints due to intervening topography and vegetation. That portion of the byway is therefore not discussed further in this site evaluation.

The characteristic landscape as viewed from SR 850 in this vicinity is one of intact hardwood forest on steep slopes to the west and low lying hardwood forest to the east. There is a wide variety of plant species with obvious groundcover, understory, mid-story and overstory components visible in the immediate foreground. There is one private inholding with structures to the north of the project site, but otherwise the scenery through which travelers pass is natural appearing.

The view from I-64 in this vicinity is backdropped with forested mountain slopes on both sides of the roadway. Large rock outcrops are visible in places on the upper slopes and ridgetops. The natural forest appears intact except for occasional glimpses of the power line on the lower north slope. The interstate corridor itself is a prominent feature cutting through the landscape. As people travel on I-64 from Lexington to Clifton Forge, they can view approximately 11 cell towers. Many of those are near towns and in areas with a large percent of privately owned land. There are no visible cell phone towers for several miles in either direction of the proposed project site, and no man-made structures are visible on the mountainsides or break into the skyline.

The most obvious man-made features in the area are the roadways and power line. However during leaf-on seasons, the power line and its towers are remarkably well screened from the view of travelers on SR 850 and I-64. The exception is in an area within about 1/4 to 1/2 mile distance of a “pinch point” where the power line, SR 850 and I-64 all come into close proximity to each other, which is also the location of the proposed cell tower site. At this point on SR 850, there are brief but obvious views of the power line and two towers that are located on either side of the trailhead parking area. The tops of several of these towers are visible from I-64, but only to viewers truly looking for them. The height of these power line towers is only slightly taller than the trees on either side of the easement, and all are backdropped by forest helping them to blend in to the landscape. The cleared right-of-way forms a visual line that is more evident than the towers, but generally this is well screened from view from I-64.

The proposed monopole at 178’ in height will be approximately twice as tall as the existing electric lattice tower. It will dominate the characteristic landscape as viewed from the Rich Hole Wilderness trailhead. The height of this proposed tower is also approximately twice the height of the trees in this area, causing the tower to dominate the characteristic landscape as viewed from the Rich Hole Wilderness Trail, at least during leaf-off seasons.

The narrow, winding profile of SR 850 (Highlands Scenic Tour) through this valley will obscure the tower from view for most of its length. However, in the series of curves to the south of the site, the proposed tower will be visually evident to northbound travelers. Due to intervening topography of several side drainages just to the north of the site, the monopole will not be visually evident to southbound travelers until they maneuver through the curve adjacent to the site. At that point, the proposed tower will be visually evident to southbound travelers and in a more significant way than the existing electric tower. This is due to the height of the proposed cell tower and to its proximity to the roadway. During leaf-off, the access road into the site and the support structures including the Versa-Lok retaining walls will be visually evident man-made features on the landscape.

From I-64 west-bound, it appears that the monopole cell tower, at 178’ tall, will likely break into the skyline, at least briefly, for viewers headed westbound. The cell tower will also be visually evident to both east and westbound travelers on I-64.

Mitigation Measures

Due to the existing terrain and mature vegetation around the site, the ground equipment should not be visible to the casual observer from SR 850 or I-64. Planted natural vegetative screening and limited contrast painting will also be used for the ground facilities. The height of the pole is the minimum that can adequately provide the coverage needed and the collocation of additional carriers without needing to have multiple towers at a lower height. However, the monopole will be of self-weathering steel (such as COR-TEN steel) and the antennas will be painted to blend in with the surrounding landscape as much as possible.

H. Public Involvement

We welcome your involvement with this decision. If you have questions about this project please contact Karen Overcash at the Supervisors Office at (540) 265-5175.

Please provide the following information with your comments:

- 1) Your name and address
- 2) Title of the Proposed Action – “Alleghany County Communication Site”
- 3) Specific comments on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.
- 4) Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in *The Roanoke Times*. Oral or hand-delivered comments must be received within our normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Comments may be faxed to 540-265-5145. Comments may be mailed electronically to our office, in a common digital format, to: comments-southern-georgewashington-jefferson@fs.fed.us. When sending electronic or fax comments, please note the name of the project in the subject line – “Alleghany County Communications Site.”

New Administrative Review Process (36 Code of Federal Regulations 218)

The Forest Service recently established new regulations for a higher-level administrative review of some types of project decisions. The objection requirements at 36 CFR 218 now apply to projects documented with either a Decision Notice for an Environmental Assessment (EA) or a Record of Decision for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As a result of the ruling and injunction issued by the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of California in *Sequoia ForestKeepers v. Tidwell*, Categorically Excluded (CE) projects documented with a Decision Memo will remain subject to the appeal requirements at 36 CFR 215. The Forest Service will continue to comply with the injunction until the case is closed or legislation is enacted that changes the requirement.

It has not been determined whether this proposed project will be analyzed with a CE or EA, therefore the administrative review process could be through an appeal or an objection. If you wish to be eligible to appeal or object to the decision for this project, please be sure to submit written comments within the above stated timeframe and you will meet eligibility requirements for either process.

For more information about the objection process, the 36 CFR 218 regulations were published in the Federal Register (78 FR 18481-18504) on March 27, 2013 at <https://federalregister.gov/a/2013-06857>. The appeal process is described in the 36 CFR 215 regulations at <http://cfr.regstoday.com/36cfr215.aspx>. You may also contact our Forest Planner, Karen Overcash at (540) 265-5175.

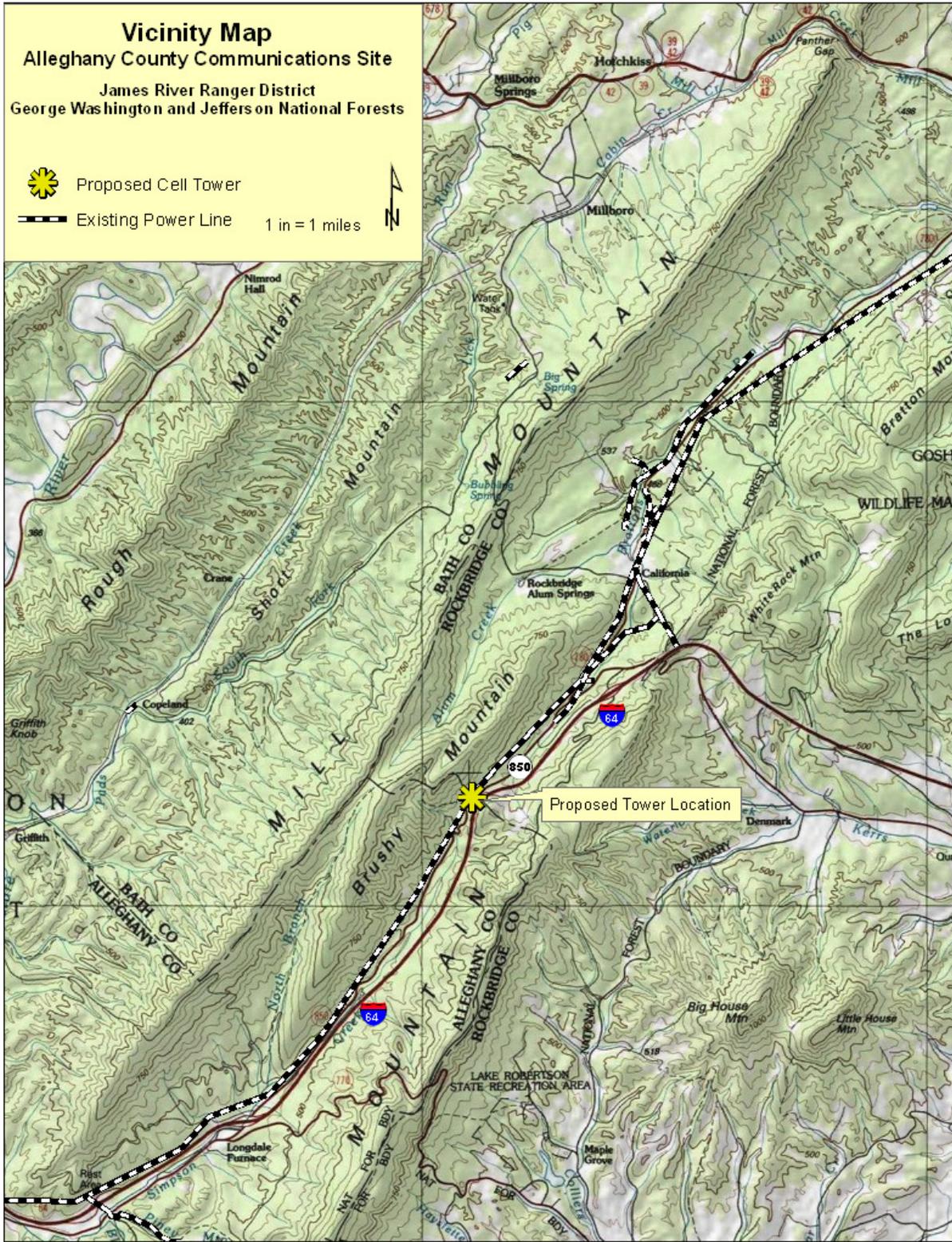
Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forests.

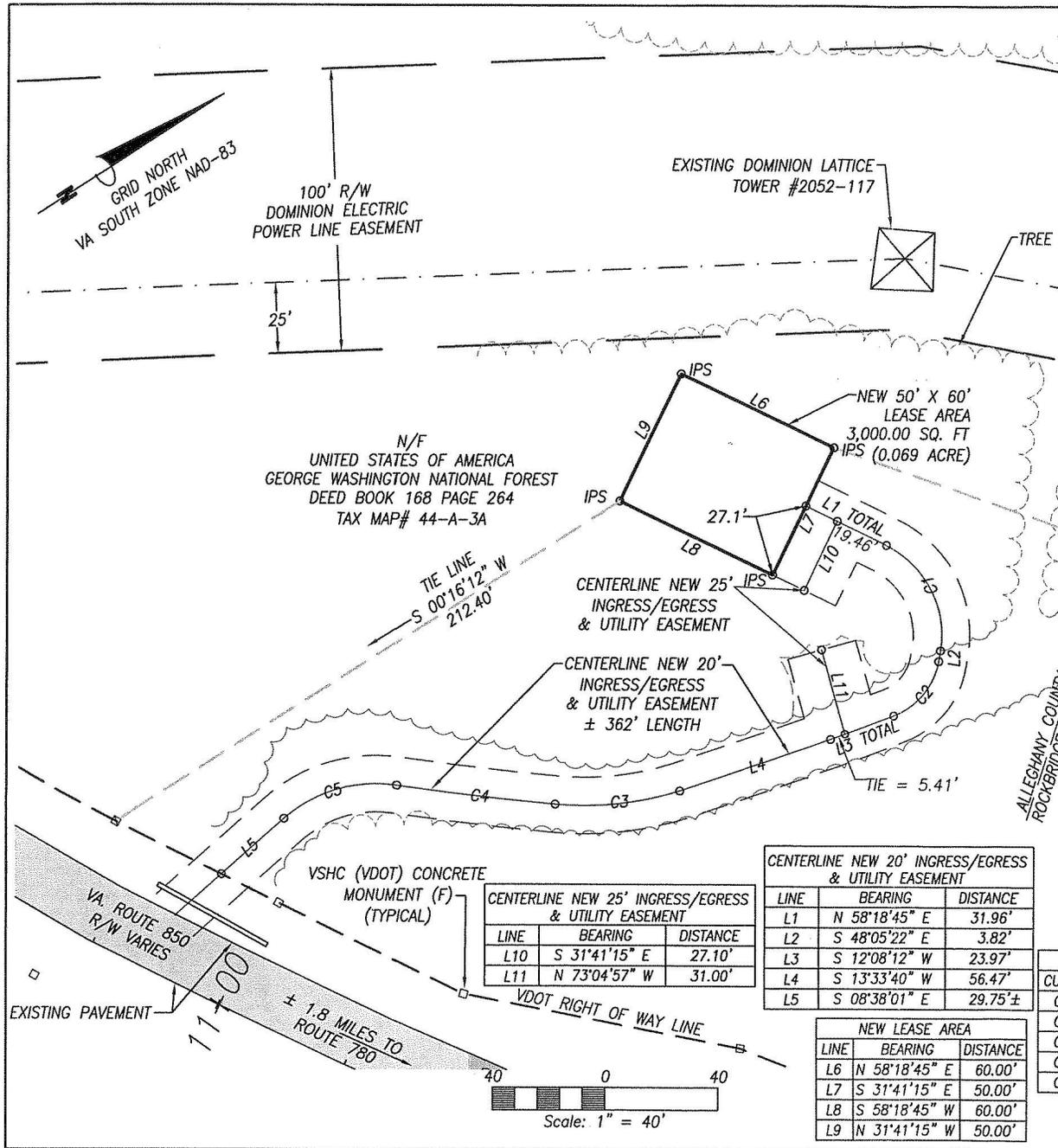
Sincerely,

/s/ Jobeth Brown, for
H. THOMAS SPEAKS, JR.
Forest Supervisor

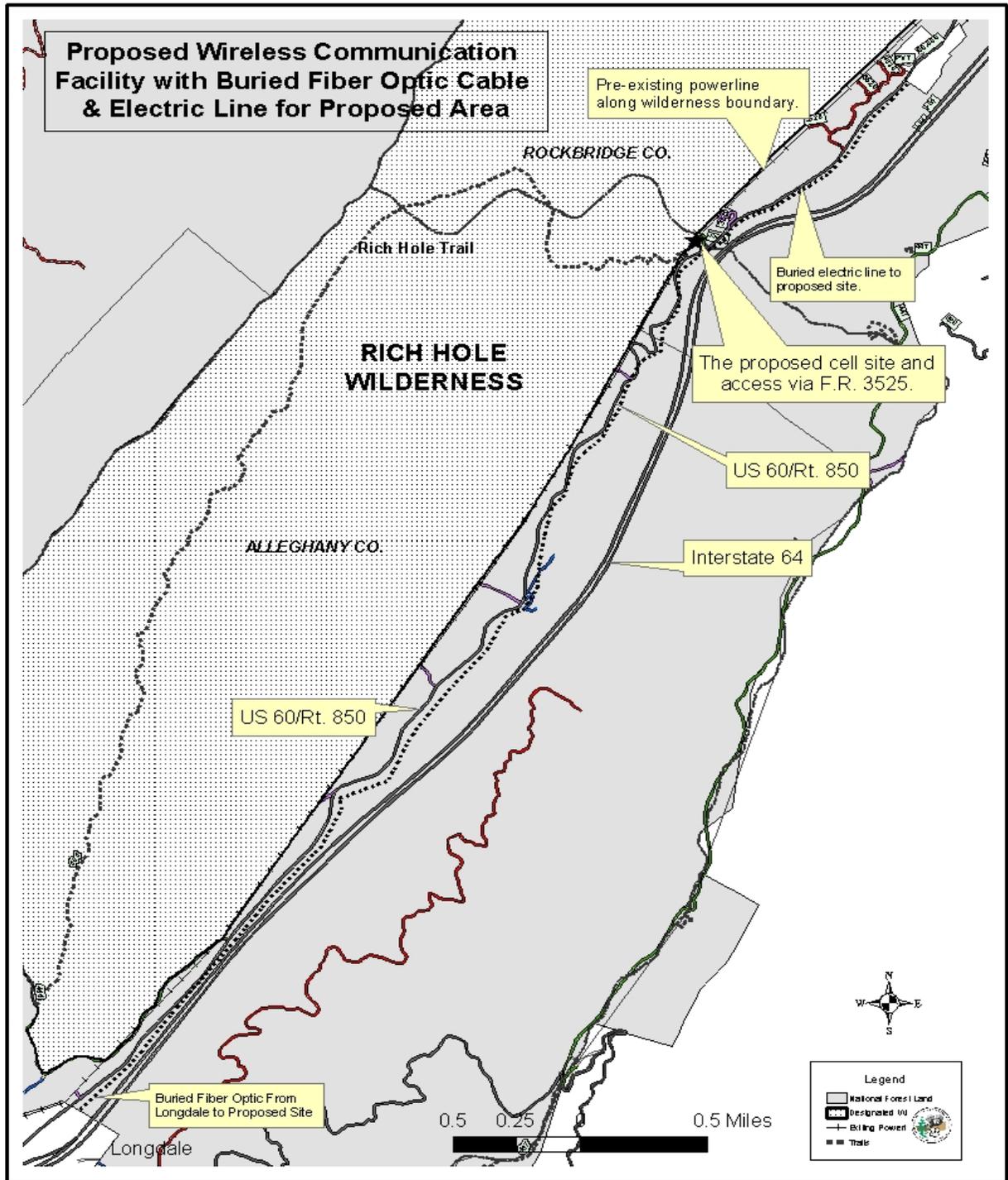
Enclosures

Vicinity Map
Site Schematic Map
2 Project Maps
Photos

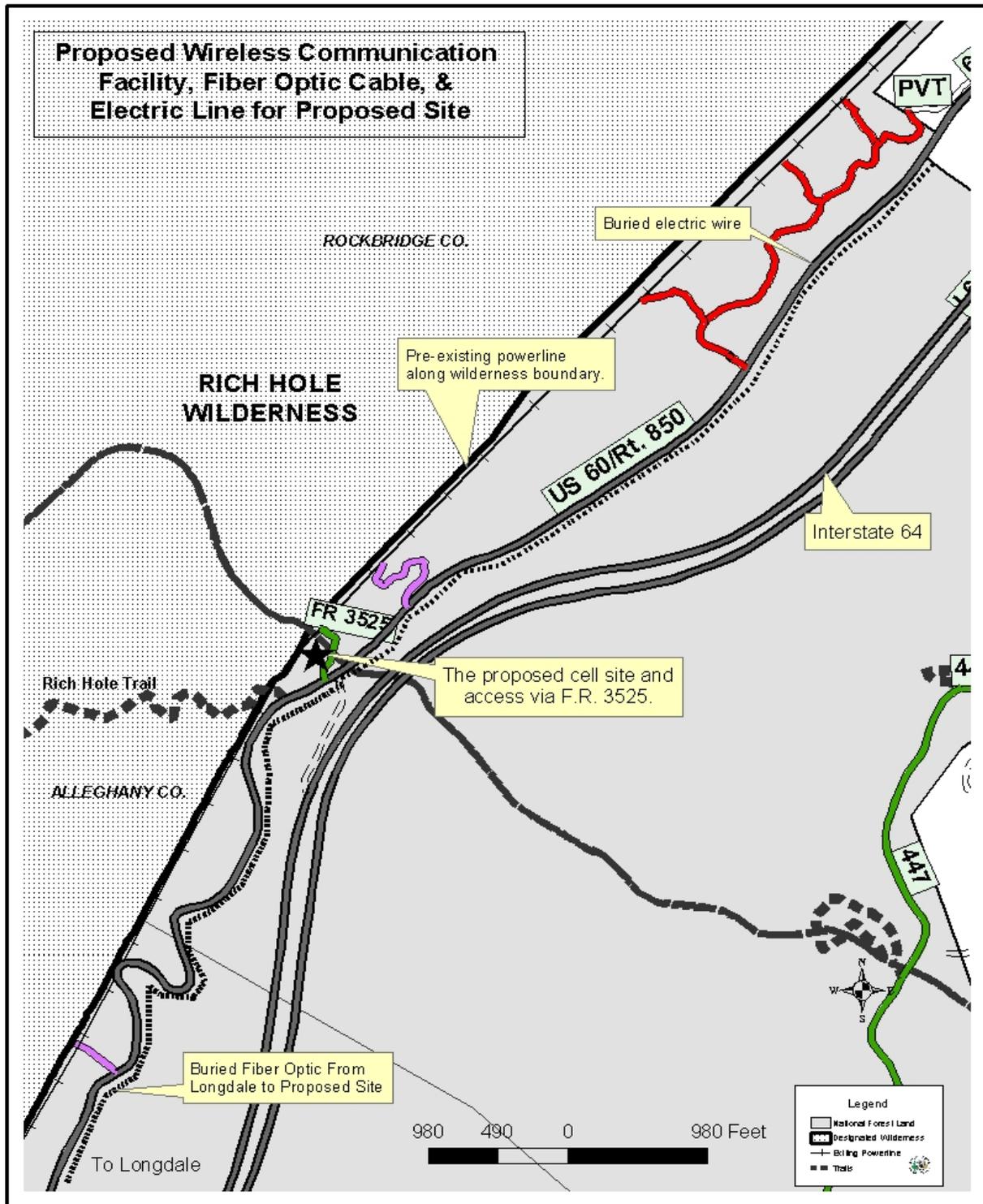




Site Schematic Map



Project Map



Project Map



Existing transmission tower from Rich Hole Wilderness Trailhead SR 850



Existing transmission tower from I-64 west



This tower is similar to the proposed tower in viewing distance from Interstate-64 and is 150 feet high. Equipment shelter is screened from view. Proposed pole would be a darker color, with self-weathering steel.