

Mt. Sterling Sustainable Energy Project



National Park Service

North Carolina, Tennessee

Project Description

The Superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Park) is announcing a 30-day public scoping period to solicit comments on a proposed sustainable energy project. The National Park Service has received a request from Duke Energy for a right-of-way permit to install a solar array to supply electricity for radio equipment located on Mt. Sterling in Haywood County, North Carolina.

The radio equipment is a vital component of the Park's emergency communication system. Duke Energy currently supplies electricity via a 3.5-mile overhead line that extends from the Park boundary along Mt. Sterling Road (NC284) to the Mt. Sterling Fire Lookout Tower. The existing overhead line would be decommissioned following installation of the solar array. Vegetation maintenance along the utility corridor would cease and the corridor would be allowed to return to a natural state.

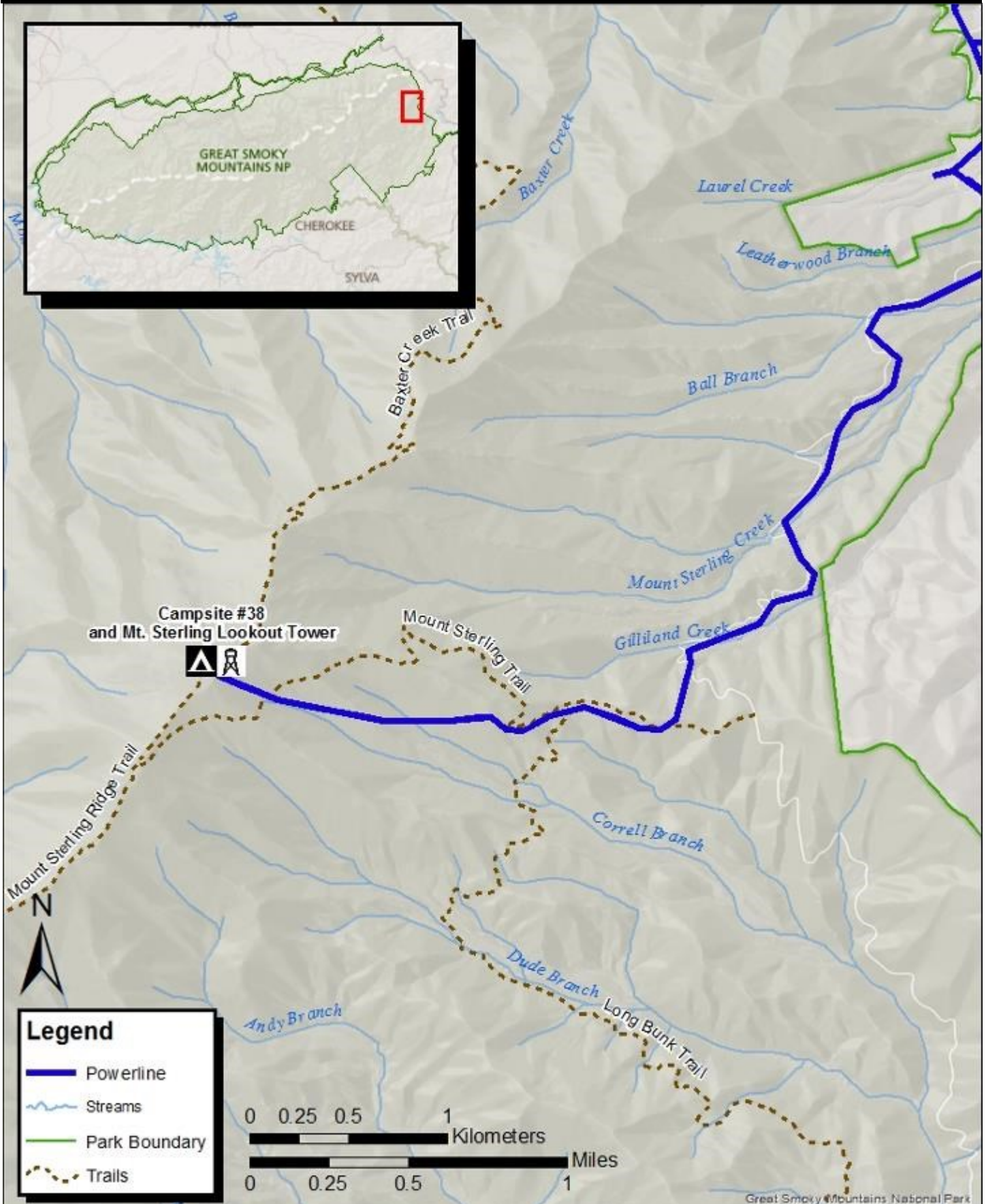
The project area includes the existing utility corridor (approximately 30 feet wide by 3.5 miles long), the proposed solar array consisting of 30 panels (approximately 40 feet long by 15 feet wide and 10.5 feet tall at the highest point), and a small area south of the panels that would need to be free of tall trees to minimize shading. Current estimates indicate that fewer than 10 trees would need to be cleared.

The National Park Service is working closely with Duke Energy on a design that meets industry reliability standards, while minimizing the project footprint and avoiding potential adverse impacts. The Park has initiated the National Environmental Policy Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and other compliance processes to evaluate potential adverse and beneficial impacts of the proposed project on the natural, cultural, and human environment.

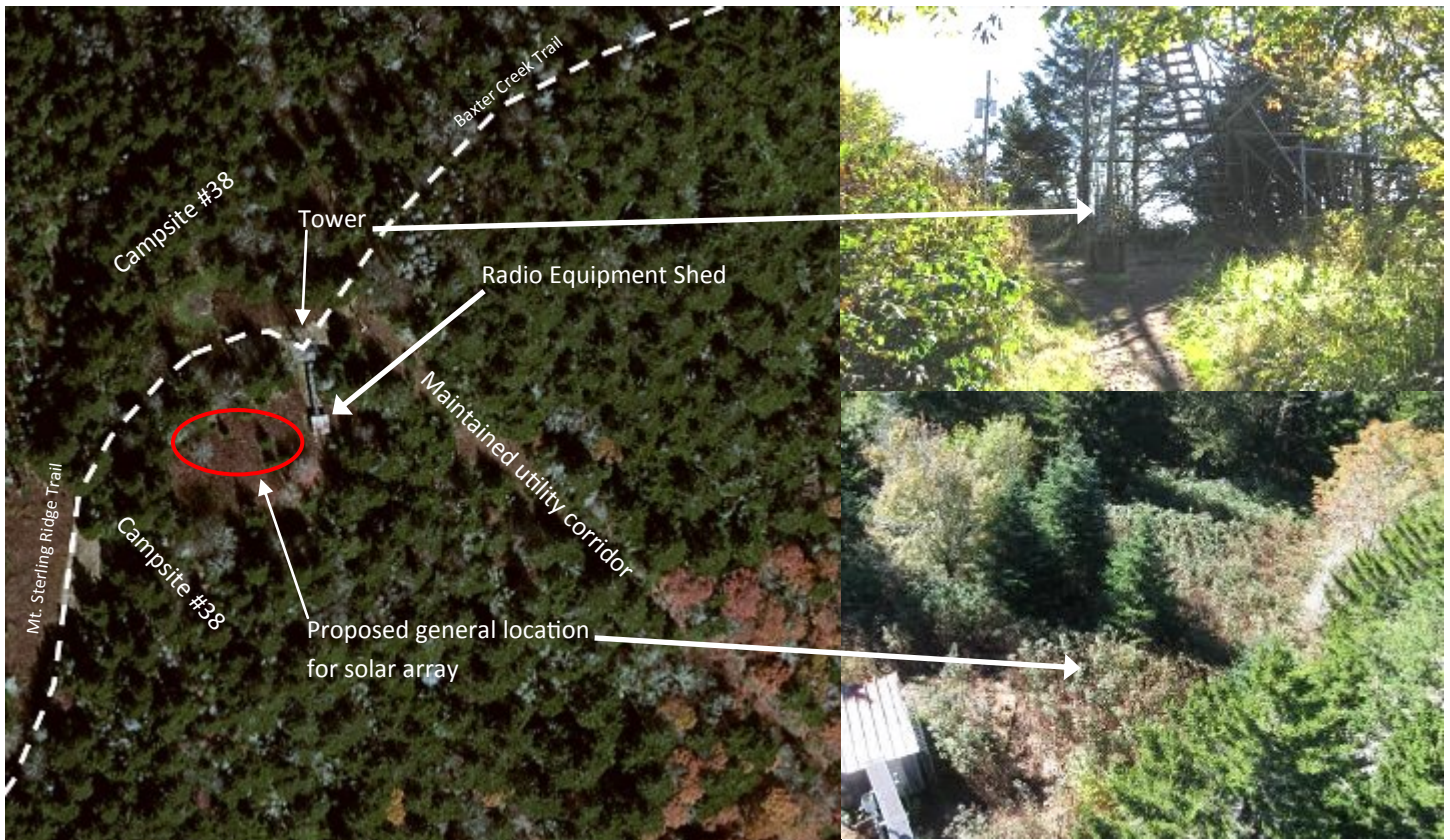


Built in 1935, the Mt. Sterling Fire Lookout Tower is no longer used as a lookout, but continues to play a role in protecting visitors and resources by supporting critical communications systems.

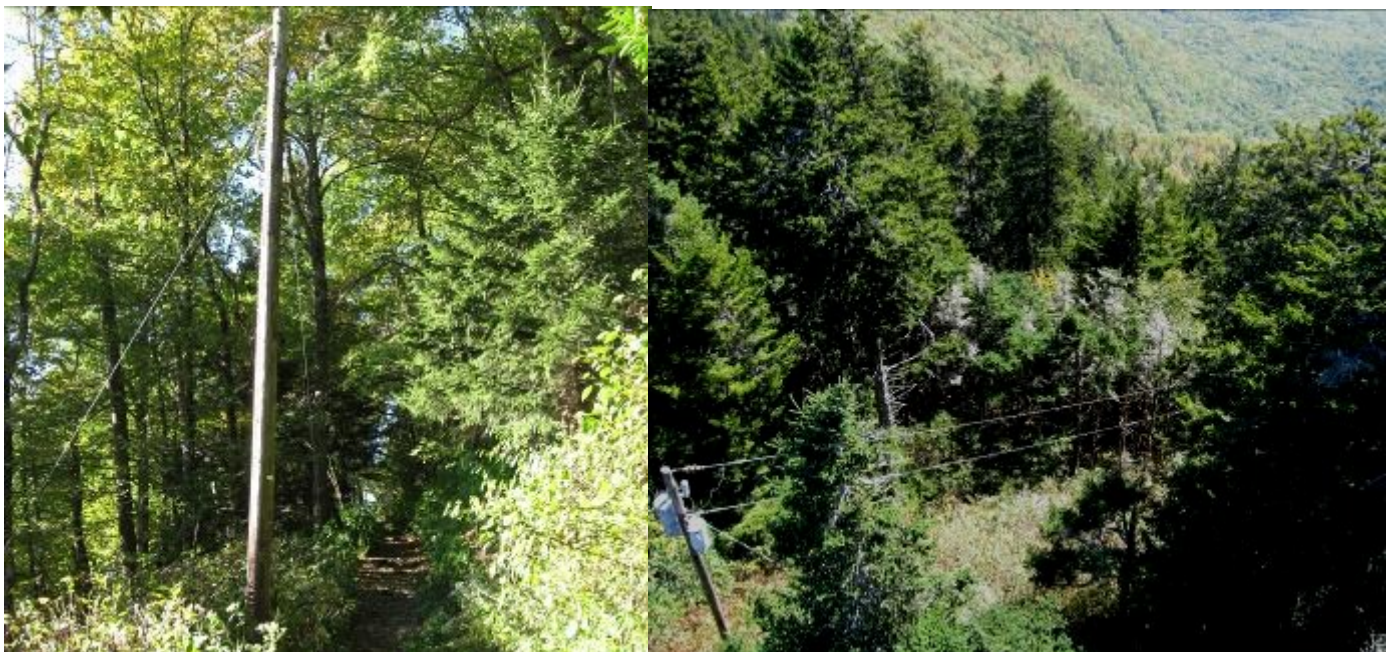
Mt. Sterling Sustainable Energy Project Area



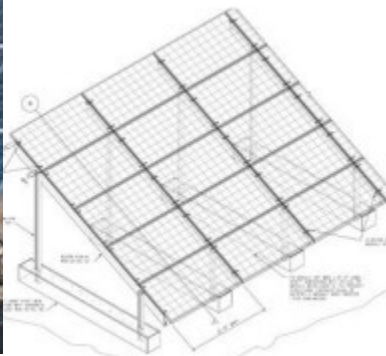
The existing overhead line roughly parallels Mt. Sterling Road (NC 284) and then climbs from the road to the tower in the general vicinity of Mt. Sterling Trail. This dead-end line provides power solely to the radio equipment. Maintaining the line is challenging and expensive based on its remote location and steep terrain.



The proposed project site is an open area southwest of the Mt. Sterling Fire Lookout Tower and adjacent to the existing radio equipment shed. Vegetation at the proposed site consists of a blackberry thicket surrounded by spruce-fir forest. Backcountry campsite #38 is located on Mt. Sterling, with some of the camping spots located near to the proposed solar site. The National Park Service is working closely with Duke Energy on a design that minimizes potential impacts on park resources and visitor use.



The solar array would allow for decommissioning of the existing electric line. Maintenance of the existing corridor would no longer be needed and approximately 13 acres currently maintained as utility corridor would return to a natural state, while maintaining or improving reliability of electric service for the National Park Service radio equipment.



A ballast-mounted design similar to those shown above is proposed to reduce ground disturbance and facilitate installation at the remote Mt. Sterling location.



As a participant in the Climate Friendly Parks program, Great Smoky Mountains National Park belongs to a network of parks nationwide that are putting climate-friendly behavior at the forefront of sustainability planning. By conducting a carbon emissions inventory, setting an emission reduction goal, developing an action plan, and committing to educate park staff, visitors, and community members about climate change, the park provides a model for climate-friendly behavior within the National Park Service. The proposed Duke Energy solar project would support this sustainability initiative.

Join the Conversation

As an integral part of the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act compliance processes, the National Park Service is asking for your input. Public scoping is an early step in the process, where the public is asked to identify opportunities and concerns to help the Park focus its analysis on important issues. The information below describes how you can get involved in scoping and provide input.

How to Comment—Public Scoping Comment Period Open through December 13,



Submit comments electronically
(preferred method)

National Park Service
Planning, Environment, and Public Comment
Website: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grsm>



Submit by mail

Superintendent
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
107 Park Headquarters Road
Gatlinburg, Tennessee 37738

Please enter your comments online or have them postmarked by December 13, 2016 to ensure consideration by the National Park Service in its decision whether to issue a right-of-way permit for this proposed project. Duke Energy also recently filed details on the proposed project with the North Carolina Utilities Commission, which must approve the project prior to implementation. If approved by the National Park Service and North Carolina Utilities Commission, project work could begin in Spring 2017.