



Public Scoping Newsletter for a proposed Telecommunications Plan and Environmental Assessment

Background – The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for a telecommunications plan for Glacier National Park. Reliable and effective telecommunication systems are essential to the performance of park operations and for maintaining employee and visitor safety. Park telecommunication systems are used to provide law enforcement and emergency medical services; meet administrative needs; monitor and protect natural and cultural resources; provide visitor services; and maintain infrastructure and utilities, among other critical functions.



Radio, phone, and computer/data-based communications in the park are currently limited, unreliable, or unavailable in a number of areas due to issues such as slow Internet and network speeds, limited bandwidth, lack of phone or data access, lack of or outdated equipment, and insufficient radio coverage. These issues reduce administrative and visitor service capabilities; increase costs; limit communications for law enforcement, backcountry patrols, and resource management; can affect emergency response capabilities; and present an increased safety risk to personnel.

The park has made numerous efforts to address these issues, resulting in some improvements. But a comprehensive, integrated plan is needed to improve the

overall effectiveness of NPS communications and enable a flexible response to changing needs and technology. A telecommunications plan is also needed to develop an appropriate platform to expand data and/or cellular connectivity to non-governmental users (e.g. visitors, off-duty employees). Communication needs for visitors and employees have evolved, with an increased need for a basic level of connectivity in developed areas. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 requires the NPS to consider applications from commercial providers who propose installing telecommunications infrastructure on park lands. If the park receives such requests, the early establishment of parameters for the placement of infrastructure, coverage areas, and other factors would inform the evaluation of applications and, if permits are approved, ensure the protection of park resources.

Proposed Action – The plan would correct deficiencies in and integrate NPS telecommunication systems (i.e. government use) and develop a platform to provide connectivity for non-governmental use in developed areas. The full scope and/or site-specific design for a number of actions cannot be known until closer to the time of implementation. Therefore, the EA for the plan would be programmatic, analyzing broad environmental impacts and deferring site-specific issues to subsequent and additional project-level review, analysis, and compliance, including tribal, National Historic Preservation Act, and Endangered Species Act consultations.

Under the plan, the park may take the following actions to improve phone, radio, and computer/data-based communications for NPS operations:

- Install microwave links at Many Glacier, Two Medicine, East Glacier, and possibly Huckleberry Lookout; a satellite Internet system at Logan Pass; Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phones at the Polebridge Ranger Station; and a Local Area Network (LAN) at the Walton Ranger Station.
- Install fiber optic cable to the Fish Creek Ranger Station and other areas.
- Add radio repeaters to existing communications sites at Chief Mtn. Port of Entry (POE), Goat Haunt Ranger Station, Mt. Hefty (US Forest Service land), the Loop (Going-to-the-Sun Road), Elk Mtn., and possibly other backcountry areas (e.g. Belly River, Nyack, Two Medicine, Mt. Brown); move one repeater to the existing communications site on Apgar Mtn.; and

install temporary repeaters as needed for non-emergency projects.

- Increase the height of existing radio towers at Chief Mtn. POE and Park Headquarters from 40 to 80 feet.
- Install solar panels and/or propane-based power (propane tank and generator) at communications sites (including backcountry sites) for backup power.
- Move communications equipment on Two Medicine Ridge to a site outside the park on Blackfeet Nation land.

To develop a platform for expanded connectivity for non-governmental use, the park would:

- establish the Two Medicine, Many Glacier, Rising Sun, and Lake McDonald Lodge developed areas as appropriate locations for commercial tele-communications infrastructure, including cellular, microwave, or other technologies;
- establish parameters for factors such as the amount, type, size, and placement of infrastructure; and
- identify approximate desired coverage areas.

Objectives

- Correct deficiencies in telecommunications systems that provide critical support for NPS operations.
- Provide for basic connectivity (e.g. cellular and/or data) for non-governmental use in developed areas while preserving the ability to experience park resources and values.
- Protect park resources by establishing parameters for telecommunications infrastructure, equipment, and coverage.
- Minimize the amount of telecommunications infrastructure in the park.
- Enable a flexible response to changing communications needs and technological advances.

Issues and Concerns

- NPS operational safety, efficiency, and cost
- Impacts to park resources, including historic districts and structures listed in the National Register of Historic Places, National Historic Landmarks, archeological and ethnographic resources, recommended wilderness, visual resources, and wildlife, including federally and state listed species



Example of a temporary, or scene-of-action, radio repeater. NPS photo.

Alternatives Identified to Date

Alternative A – Proposed Action

Alternative B – No action; there would be no change to the current management direction for telecommunication systems in the park, i.e. improvements would continue to be made on a case-by-case basis rather than under an integrated plan.

EA Process Overview and Schedule

- Public Scoping (February 24-March 9, 2020)
- Preparation of Plan/EA (March-May 2020)
- Public Review of Plan/EA (May/June 2020)
- Release of Decision Document (July 2020)

Public Comments During Scoping

Your comments will help identify issues, concerns, and other alternatives to evaluate in the EA. There will be another opportunity for you to comment when the plan/EA is completed.

Please post your scoping comments online at:

<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/GNPtelecommunicationsplan>

Or send comments to:

Superintendent, Glacier National Park

Attn: Telecommunications Plan

PO Box 1

West Glacier, MT 59936

Phone: 406-888-7901

**Please provide comments by
March 9, 2020**
