

Bruce M. Powell, Acting Superintendent  
Mammoth Cave National Park  
P.O. Box 7  
Mammoth Cave, KY 42259-0007

January 28, 2005

Dear Superintendent Powell:

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the "Revised Draft Environmental Assessment to Construct Wireless Telecommunication Facilities at Hickory Cabin Fire Tower Site" in Mammoth Cave National Park. PEER is a national alliance of local, state and federal resource professionals working to protect the environment.

By way of overview, it is important to put this proposal into a broader perspective. Our National Park System protects and preserves the most precious lands in the United States. Mammoth Cave National Park, just 83 square miles in area, protects the world's most extensive cave system, and is thus one of the System's most extraordinary components. The National Park Service's own website describes Mammoth Cave as "an incredible natural phenomenon that continues to challenge humankind." It is not surprising, therefore, that Mammoth Cave has gone beyond recognition by the United States; it has also been designated both a World Heritage Site and an International Biosphere Reserve. Few areas on Earth have achieved such high status.

Despite this international acclaim, however, Park administrators appear eager to allow Bluegrass Cellular to construct a 180-foot cell tower at the Hickory Cabin Fire Tower Site. A tower at this site would allow cell phone use not just in the Visitor Center area (where wired lines are available), but in many parts of the backcountry, including some Wilderness Study Areas.

Notably, park administrators reject two other proposals in the EA: one for a tower at the Park Operations Area (mostly because it would not provide as much cellular coverage) and one hypothetical proposal outside of the Park along Highway 1827.

PEER does not believe that the revised draft EA provides any justification for allowing a cell tower to be built at the Hickory Cabin Fire Tower site. For example, the specific language of RM-53, the NPS document that guides action on proposals for wireless telecommunication facilities, does not allow the Park Service to approve a cell tower at the Hickory Cabin Fire Tower site.

The EA mentions RM-53 briefly a few times, and indicates that the Park Service is obligated to comply with it, but it does not discuss any of its specific provisions. One part of RM-53 states:

"ROW permits will only be issued for those requests for which there is no feasible and prudent alternative and will not result in a derogation of the resources, values and purposes for which the park was established."

Thus, any proposal for a wireless facility inside Mammoth Cave National Park must pass two tests: 1) there must be no feasible and prudent alternative to the proposal; and 2) it must not result in a derogation of the resources, values and purposes for which the park was established.

1. **Feasible and prudent alternatives:** The EA makes clear that there are "feasible and prudent" alternatives to the Hickory Cabin Fire Tower Site outside the park, along Highway 1827. It makes no difference that the Park might have to pay to co-locate its antennas on a tower outside of the Park (as opposed to one in the Park). As it is, the Park is misinformed about the "financial benefits" of leasing its own land for cell towers. If the Hickory Cabin Fire Tower Site (or the Park Operations Area Site) were to be approved for a cell tower, the Park might collect \$3,000-\$6,000 per year as lease fees, but that money would have to be turned over to the U.S. Treasury pursuant to O.M.B. Circular A-25. That circular provides:

"Unless a statute provides otherwise, user charge collections will be credited to the general fund of the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts, as required by 31 U.S.C. 3302."

The lease fees cannot be used to offset any of the costs of administering the Park's telecommunications program.

2. **Derogation of the resources, values and purposes for which the park was established:** Widespread use of cell phones and other wireless devices would result in a derogation of the "resources, values and purposes for which the park was established." Mammoth Cave National Park was established to preserve one of the world's most extraordinary natural areas. One of the values of the Park—a value growing with each passing year—is to allow humankind to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and find peace and quiet amid a natural setting.

The majority of the land surface of the Park consists of Wilderness Study Areas, places that may one day be designated wilderness. Many visitors to such areas go there to get away from cell phones and other wireless devices. (Cell phones today are not just phones, but video games, music, the Internet, and more.) The EA states on page 3 that "[c]ellular telephone users would benefit from improved telecommunication services for their safety and security, personal, and business needs." The EA fails to mention or discuss the negative impact of widespread cell phone use on the thousands of visitors who have no interest in making or receiving wireless calls (or hearing others make or receive them) while visiting the backcountry of Mammoth Cave National Park.

Then there is the issue of cell phone use in the spectacular caves of the Park. The EA does not mention specifically whether cellular signal will be available in the caves. But even if signals will not be available at this time, if cell phone use becomes commonplace in the Park, it is only a matter of time before some members of the public demand use of their phones everywhere, including the caves.

An early visitor to one of the caves in the area had this to say:

"No ray of light but the glimmer of our lamps; no sound but the echo of our own steps; nothing but darkness, silence, immensity."

If the Hickory Creek tower is approved, such remarkable experiences will likely vanish at Mammoth Cave National Park.

Since there are feasible and prudent alternatives outside of the Park, and because the resources, values and purposes of Mammoth Cave National Park would be negatively impacted by widespread cell phone use, RM-53 does not allow Park administrators to choose the Hickory Cabin site for a cell tower.

Moreover, the EA fails to provide convincing evidence of the need for a cell tower in Mammoth Cave National Park. The EA maintains that a tower is required to protect the "health, safety, and security needs" of visitors. But it cites just three incidents from the past three years. At a park where more than 5 to 6 million people visited during those years, three people might have benefited from using a cell phone. I say "might" because the EA does not make clear whether cell phones would have made any difference in the outcomes of the incidents described. The outcomes are not included in the EA.

The EA also states that "mere convenience" of cell phone use is not the reason the Park is advocating a cell tower. But based on the limited number of incidents cited, it is near certain that when thousands of visitors start using cell phones at Mammoth Cave National Park, all (or almost all) of the calls will indeed be for "mere convenience" and not for "health, safety, and security."

For the foregoing reasons, we ask that you reject any cell tower inside Mammoth Cave National Park as an unwarranted and unnecessary intrusion into this special place.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch  
Executive Director