

Congressional Report Regarding the Status of the Philadelphia Peak Radio Repeater Green Mountain National Forest, Rochester Ranger District

May 2015

The Philadelphia Peak radio repeater (repeater site) is part of a radio receiver-transmitter system that provides two-way radio communication for the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) office and field staff. The repeater site includes a radio repeater, associated shelter, antenna, and solar panels located in a remote mountain setting in the Rochester Ranger District within the 12,336-acre Joseph Battell Wilderness. Access to the site is provided by a series of roads and trails via four-wheel drive vehicle and all-terrain vehicle to the boundary of the wilderness. The last 0.7 mile of the access route is within the wilderness and continues along an old woods road (0.5 mile) before bushwhacking is necessary up steep terrain to the top of the mountain at an elevation of about 3,200 feet, where the repeater site is located.

The repeater site was within the Remote Backcountry Forest Management Area at the time of the approval of the 2006 GMNF Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), which allows this type of use. The New England Wilderness Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-382) designated this area as part of the Joseph Battell Wilderness after the Forest Plan was approved. There was no special provision in the law to retain or manage the repeater site. Radio coverage for a substantial part of the GMNF is reliant on the existing Philadelphia Peak radio repeater to provide radio communication for natural resource management on about 12,900 acres of National Forest System lands. It is also essential for providing communication for law enforcement and search/rescue personnel across ownership boundaries.

The GMNF is in the process of completing a minimum-requirements analysis to determine the best course of action to remove the repeater site from the Joseph Battell Wilderness. Once that action is selected, actual removal will require a site-specific environmental analysis pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Initial data gathering for the minimum-requirements analysis informed GMNF staff that the existing repeater site is a non-conforming structure within the wilderness and should be removed from the area. Even though the repeater site is an essential component of the Forest-wide radio system that provides communication capacity for agency staff as well as for external partners, it is not required to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the wilderness as defined in Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act.

A repeater site feasibility study conducted for the GMNF determined that it may require up to three alternative sites outside of the wilderness to adequately replace the coverage lost from the removal of the repeater site. Further study is needed to determine the location of new repeater site(s) to provide adequate radio coverage replacement for the forest and external partners. Access, construction, and lease agreement costs are estimated to range from about \$120,000 to \$550,000, depending on which combination of sites is selected.

In order to not disrupt current radio communication capabilities, the removal of the radio repeater site in the Joseph Battell Wilderness is anticipated to be delayed for 2 to 3 years. This delay will allow time to complete the necessary NEPA analysis, secure funds for the new repeater site(s), and ensure that the new repeaters are in operation.

Removing the repeater site from the Joseph Battell Wilderness will provide a long-term solution to preserve wilderness character by removing the non-conforming structure. Locating the new repeaters outside wilderness will also simplify access to the site(s) and allow for improved maintenance capability.