

Cell Towers and Public Health



Rapidly increasing smartphone and tablet use in recent years has led to rising demand for high-speed wireless data services. In order to meet this demand and to accommodate evolving wireless technology (4G and LTE networks, etc.), cell providers are installing new wireless infrastructure and modifying existing installations nationwide. As such, Cochise County has experienced more applications for “wireless telecommunication facilities,” or cell towers, unstaffed cell sites that transmit and receive low-power radio signals.

Can Cochise County Consider Public Health?

Cochise County is legally prohibited from considering public health in cell tower application review. Under the Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996, local governments cannot deny an application for a cell tower site because of perceived health risks if the proposed site complies with federal Radio Frequency emissions standards. Similarly, local governments may not set their own emissions standards.

The County is permitted to regulate the design, visual impact, site location, and zoning compliance of cell tower installations. Therefore, the County focuses on the location compatibility of proposed installations. For compliance with federal standards and public health concerns, contact the Federal Communications Commission’s Radio Frequency Safety Program (see contact information below).

FCC Application Requirements – Public Health

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) manages wireless telecommunications, or cell towers. The FCC is responsible for setting Radio Frequency (RF) limits for cell sites. By law, cell towers must operate at or below federal emissions limits. The FCC regularly evaluates new experimental findings to determine whether its RF standards require modification. According to the FCC, measurements near cell tower sites are generally thousands of times lower than federal limits. The FCC currently holds that there is “no way such [installations] could constitute a potential health hazard to nearby residents.”

If there is reasonable evidence that FCC RF emissions limits are being exceeded at an existing cell tower facility, one may contact the FCC to request an investigation. More information on FCC RF limits can be found at <https://www.fcc.gov/general/radio-frequency-safety-0>

Cell Tower Application Process

When a company wants to build a cell tower in Cochise County, it must go through an application process, requiring:

County Review

- Approval for the proposed site design, visual impact, location and zoning compliance

Federal Review

- Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act
- Compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act; and may require
- Notification to the Federal Aviation Administration; and
- Antenna Structure Registration with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

Contact the FCC:

The Federal Communications
Commission’s-Radio Frequency Safety
Program
rfsafety@fcc.gov
1-888-225-5322
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Contact Cochise County:

Planning and Zoning
planningandzoning@cochise.az.gov
520-432-9300
1415 Melody Lane, Building E
Bisbee, AZ 85603
<https://www.cochise.az.gov/planning-and-zoning/home>