



The Environment for Incident Communications

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Incident Communications Webinar
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Hello, I'm Tom Tidwell.

I have been in the Forest Service for 33 years now in a wide range of capacities, most of them having to do with fire. I am keenly aware of what our fire organization does, and I see it as part of everything we do as an agency.

I mean this from the bottom of my heart: I am proud of what our fire organization has accomplished, and my job as Chief is to do everything I can to support you.

In that connection, we are fortunate to have a Secretary of Agriculture who is so personally and deeply committed our mission. It is difficult to overstate how unusual that is—and how important that is to me ... and for us.

As you well know, Forest Service employees work in diverse ecosystems, and every location has its own challenges and opportunities. But wherever we work, we all have certain priorities in common:

- forest restoration;
- a commitment to communities;
- and a skillful response to wildfire, with both restoration and communities in mind.

Coordinating fire information inside and outside the agency is not new. But what *is* new is the information setting in which we work. Electronic media have erased the distinction between

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national and local media. The Internet ensures that everything we say will instantly travel everywhere and live a long, long time.

So it is easier than ever to get our message out—to say the right thing. The Forest Service has the best wildland firefighters in the world; what we say and how we say it is a critical part of our success. We're taking time together today to strengthen our delivery of incident communications.

Let's begin. I want us to consider three important points about the environment we are in.

Point number one: The Forest Service is responsible for all communication that comes from an incident, large or small, on a national forest or grassland. We, the Forest Service, will live with what is said and printed long after the Incident Management Team leaves and the fire is out.

With that in mind, we want to strengthen our delegation of authority to emphasize the importance of incident communications and the media. The Forest Service line officer is ultimately responsible for all communication from the incident, and that needs to be clearer than ever in the delegation of authority and throughout the duration of the incident.

To keep things on track, the local unit needs to coordinate continually with the incident commander or IMT about communications and the media. Electronic communications and social media should receive the same attention and scrutiny as traditional press releases.

Point number two: On fires on National Forest System lands, all information officers work for the Forest Service, even if they are not regular Forest Service employees.

We expect every information officer to support Forest Service protocols ... the way we want to communicate about fire ... even if it differs from the way other agencies do things. So it is important to make our expectations clear.

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Here's an example: On incidents on national forests and grasslands, we want information officers to respond to questions from all media, including the national media, *about that incident only*. Information officers should refer all questions not about the local incident to the Forest PAO.

Point number three: Without a doubt, the biggest trend in communication is social media. But no Forest Service unit has USDA approval to create a Facebook profile or a YouTube account. There's a good reason for that: Social media are not yet secure.

That means, for incidents on national forests or grasslands, that Forest Service employees, information officers, and incident management teams will not create Facebook pages or post to YouTube.

The Department recognizes the value of social media and is committed to its use—but only if it is secure from hackers who would compromise national security or—in our line of work—would risk the lives of people near wildfires.

USDA maintains one Department-wide Facebook account and one YouTube channel for all USDA agencies. The Department is working hard on a policy for Facebook and YouTube to ensure security and accuracy. Once that's done, USDA will authorize new accounts and profiles. Even then, it will be important to remember that social media might not be appropriate for short-duration fires, because the approval process will take time.

So those are the three points I wanted to make. In today's environment for incident communications, the smart thing to do on a fire is to strengthen delegation of authority, stick to Forest Service protocols, and stay safe and smart in the use of social media.

With that said, I want to return to the overarching point I made at the outset of my remarks: I know from personal experience how good you are. Any outfit that can fight fire when needed and manage fire as well as we do is absolutely world class, and we are doing a great job of

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getting the message out. Americans are deeply grateful to their firefighters, and I personally know and value your professionalism and your deep personal commitment to restoring the lands we care for and protecting the people we serve.

The Forest Service fire organization—every part of it—is simply the best in the world. You are doing hard work in the best and smartest way you know how to do it. Keep it up, stay smart, and be safe out there.