Chapter 15
Communications

Policy

Agency specific policies for radio communications may be found in:


Dispatch Recording Devices

Recording of phone calls without all party’s prior knowledge and consent is not permitted. Recording of radio traffic is appropriate.

- **BLM** – Radio recording devices will be used by BLM dispatch offices or any interagency office dispatching BLM resources.

Cellular/Satellite Phone Communications

Cellular/satellite telephones will not be used to communicate tactical or operational traffic unless no other means are available. Cellular/satellite telephones will not be used for flight following in lieu of normal flight following procedures. Telephone communications may be used for logistical purposes.

Refer to Chapter 7 for policy regarding use of mobile devices while operating a vehicle.

Radio Communications

Radio communications provide for the flow of tactical information needed for the command/control and safety of personnel and resources.

Radio Contracts

Radios used for fire and aviation activities must be approved by the National Interagency Incident Communication Division (NIICD). Information on contracts, software, hardware requirements and approved radios is available at https://www.nifc.gov/NIICD/documents.html, or contact your agency Telecommunications Department or the National Interagency Fire Center Communications Duty Officer (NIFC CDO) at (208) 387-5644.

- **BLM** – For information on BLM contracts, software, and hardware requirements and approved radios, contact the Branch of Radio Operations (FA-350) at (208) 387-5830.
Radio Frequency Management

FM frequencies are authorized and assigned by the designated Washington Office frequency manager and managed by the state and local Communications Officers. Frequencies shall not be used without express permission from the local, state, regional, or national level designated frequency management personnel.

Daily Operational Frequency Management

Frequency assignments for normal daily and initial attack operations are made on a permanent basis and are requested through the normal Radio Frequency Authorization process from the local, state, regional or national level designated frequency management personnel.

Air operations initial attack frequencies, both AM and FM, will be assigned by the NIFC CDO. These assignments will be on an interagency basis and coordinated with the Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs).

Mutual Aid Frequency Management

Mutual aid frequency sharing agreements can be made at the local level. However, mutual-aid frequency sharing agreements are only valid in the specific location where they originated. These agreements do not authorize the use of a shared frequency other than in the specified local area.

NIFC national fire frequencies are not to be used for these agreements. The only exception may occur when an agency holds a National Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) Radio Frequency Authorization (RFA) for a frequency that is included in the NIFC Channeling Plan. If this occurs, notification and coordination with the NIFC CDO is requested.

Incident Frequency Management

National level coordination and assignments of incident frequencies is the responsibility of the National Interagency Incident Communications Division (NIICD) and is managed by the NIFC CDO.

When communications requirements exceed normal operations, the NIFC CDO may request that GACCs assign a Communication Coordinator (COMC) to facilitate geographic area frequency management. Additional information may be found in the National Interagency Mobilization Guide.

- Frequencies for Type 1 and 2 incidents are assigned by the NIFC CDO and are managed by a qualified Communications Unit Leader (COML). The COML will request, assign, and report all frequencies used on the incident to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of
all aircraft frequencies. Frequency use will be documented on the ICS-205 Incident Radio Communications Plan and on ICS-220 Air Operation Summary forms. These completed forms will be made available to incident personnel.

- Type 3 incidents, or other incidents that do not have an assigned COML, will coordinate and request all frequency and communication equipment needs through the COMC and/or the NIFC CDO.

If additional frequencies are required, the COML will order them through the established ordering process.

Additional frequencies for any operation may be available on a temporary basis, and may be requested by the NIFC CDO from the Washington Office Spectrum managers when:

- The NIICD national frequencies are all committed within a specific geographic area;
- New incidents within a specific complex create a need for additional frequencies;
- The fire danger rating is extreme and the potential for additional new incidents is high; and/or
- When there is frequency congestion due to significant numbers of incidents in close proximity.

**Aviation Operations Frequency Management**

- **Air-to-Air** initial attack – AM frequencies are assigned yearly to the GACCs by the NIFC CDO in coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Once assigned, management of those frequencies is the responsibility of the GACC and may be allocated to zones. Frequencies allocated to zones for initial attack are not to be dedicated for project fire use. If additional frequencies are required, they must be requested from and assigned by the NIFC CDO.

- **Air-to-Ground** – FM frequencies will be assigned and coordinated by the NIFC CDO and agency frequency managers.

Both AM and FM aviation frequency assignments will be used on an interagency basis and a master record of these assignments is maintained by the NIFC CDO. Updated frequency information is coordinated annually with the GACCs.

**Pre-assigned National Frequencies**

**National Air Guard Frequency (168.6250 MHz)**

A National Interagency Air Guard frequency for aircraft will be used for emergency aviation communications. Continuous monitoring of this frequency in narrowband mode is mandatory by agency dispatch centers. A Continuous Tone Coded Squelch System (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz must be used when
transmitting on the National Air Guard Frequency. This frequency must be programmed into the last channel of every group in fire handheld radios.

This frequency, 168.6250 MHz is only used for:
- Air-to-air emergency contact and coordination;
- Ground-to-air emergency contact; and
- Initial call, recall, and re-direction of aircraft when no other contact frequency is available.

**National Flight Following Frequency (168.6500 MHz)**
The National Flight Following Frequency is used to monitor interagency and contract aircraft. All aircraft on point-to-point or mission flights should establish/terminate flight following, and confirm Automated Flight Following (AFF) on the National Flight Following frequency.

All dispatch centers/offices will monitor the national flight following frequency at all times. A CTCSS tone of 110.9 must be used when transmitting and receiving on the National Flight Following frequency.

The National Flight Following frequency is to be used for flight following, dispatch, or redirection of aircraft. No other use is authorized.

**National Interagency Air Tactics Frequencies (166.6750 MHz, 167.9500 MHz, 169.1500 MHz, 169.2000 MHz, 170.0000 MHz)**
These frequencies are used to support air-to-air or ground-to-air communications on incidents west of the 95th meridian. These frequencies shall be used for air-to-air and ground-to-air communications only. They are not for use as ground tactical operational frequencies.

Transmitter power output of radios installed in aircraft utilizing these frequencies shall be limited to 10 watts. Use of these frequencies in base stations and repeaters is prohibited.

These frequencies will be assigned by the NIFC CDO or in coordination with the local unit if a NTIA-RFA is in effect.

**National Interagency Airtanker Base Frequency (123.9750 MHz)**
This frequency is assigned by the FAA to all airtanker bases (unless otherwise notified) for exclusive use. Use of this frequency is restricted to a radius of 40 nautical miles and 10,000 feet MSL from the coordinates of the airtanker base. No other use is authorized.

**Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency (168.550 MHz)**
BLM and USFS Smokejumpers have been granted exclusive use of primary National air-to-ground tactical frequency 168.550.
This frequency is also granted for use, with a separate transmit and receive tone, as a secondary/backup frequency for the BLM and USFS Rappel/Rope Assisted Delivery System (RADS) aerial delivery operations if the local air to ground tactical frequency is being used for initial attack operations and use of that local frequency could cause interference issues.

Use of this frequency for other than the delivery of aerial firefighters is prohibited. A CTCSS tone must be used when transmitting and receiving on the Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency. Smokejumpers use CTCSS tone 123.0; Rappel/RADS crews use CTCSS tone 110.9.

**Government-wide Area Common User Frequencies (163.1000 MHz, 168.3500 MHz)**

These frequencies are used on a non-interference basis and are not exclusive to any user. These frequencies are not to be used for air-to-ground operations and are prohibited by DOI and USDA from use as a frequency during operations involving the protection of life and property.

- **NOTE:** When traveling between incidents, be sure to monitor for incident radio traffic in the area before using these frequencies.

**National Interagency Fire Tactical Frequencies (168.0500 MHz, 168.200 MHz, 168.6000 MHz, 168.2500 MHz, 166.7250 MHz, 166.7750 MHz)**

These frequencies are approved for ground tactical operations (line of sight) on incidents. Maximum transmitter output is 5 watts.

Not authorized for:
- Air-to-air communications;
- Air-to-ground communications; or
- Radio transmitter power output more than 5 watts.

Permission to use these frequencies requires prior approval from the NIFC CDO (or COMC when mobilized).

**Incident Radio Support**

All National Incident Radio Support Cache (NIRSC) communications equipment will be returned to NIRSC at NIFC immediately after the incident is turned over to the jurisdictional agency.

No cache communications equipment shall be moved from one incident to another without being first returned to NIRSC for refurbishment. Unused and red-sealed equipment may be moved, but only upon approval of the NIFC CDO or COMC.
Military Communications on an Incident

Military units assigned to an incident are assigned radios approved for use on incidents. Each battalion is typically assigned 80 handheld radios. Sixteen of these radios are used by military crew liaisons. Intercrew communications within a military unit is provided by the military on their radios using their frequencies. All frequency assignments at the incident will be made by the COML in accordance with the ICS-205.

Some military units have aviation VHF-FM radios compatible with civilian systems. Other units must be provided VHF-FM radios prior to dispatch to an incident. Wiring harnesses and radios will be resource ordered by the incident. The resource order will include a request for qualified personnel from NIICD to perform the installation of the equipment. Equipment will not be sent without qualified personnel to install it.