

Chapter 15 Communications

3 Policy

4 Agency specific policies for radio communications may be found in:

- 5 • Department of Interior, Department Manual, Radio Communications
6 Handbook (377 DM).
- 7 • USDA Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 6609.14 Chapters 10-40 and Forest
8 Service Manual (FSM) 6600 Systems Management Chapter 6640 –
9 Telecommunications.

10 Dispatch Recording Devices

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

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

15 Cellular/Satellite Phone Communications

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

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

22 Radio Communications

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

25 Radio Contracts

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

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

1 Radio Frequency Management

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

7 Daily Operational Frequency Management

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

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

15 Mutual Aid Frequency Management

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

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

25 Incident Frequency Management

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

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

- 33 • Frequencies for Type 1 and 2 incidents are assigned by the NIFC CDO and
34 are managed by a qualified Communications Unit Leader (COML). The
35 COML will request, assign, and report all frequencies used on the incident
36 to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of

1 all aircraft frequencies. Frequency use will be documented on the ICS-205
2 Incident Radio Communications Plan and on ICS-220 Air Operation
3 Summary forms. These completed forms will be made available to incident
4 personnel.
5 • Type 3 incidents, or other incidents that do not have an assigned COML,
6 will coordinate and request all frequency and communication equipment
7 needs through the COMC and/or the NIFC CDO.

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

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

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

21 **Aviation Operations Frequency Management**

- 22 • Air-to-Air initial attack – AM frequencies are assigned yearly to the
23 GACCs by the NIFC CDO in coordination with the Federal Aviation
24 Administration (FAA). Once assigned, management of those frequencies is
25 the responsibility of the GACC and may be allocated to zones. Frequencies
26 allocated to zones for initial attack are not to be dedicated for project fire
27 use. If additional frequencies are required, they must be requested from and
28 assigned by the NIFC CDO.
- 29 • Air-to-Ground – FM frequencies will be assigned and coordinated by the
30 NIFC CDO and agency frequency managers.

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

35 **Pre-assigned National Frequencies**

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

37 A National Interagency Air Guard frequency for aircraft will be used for
38 emergency aviation communications. Continuous monitoring of this frequency
39 in narrowband mode is mandatory by agency dispatch centers. A Continuous
40 Tone Coded Squelch System (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz must be used when

1 transmitting on the National Air Guard Frequency. This frequency must be
2 programmed into the last channel of every group in fire handheld radios.

3 This frequency, 168.6250 MHz is only used for:

- 4 • Air-to-air emergency contact and coordination;
- 5 • Ground-to-air emergency contact; and
- 6 • Initial call, recall, and re-direction of aircraft when no other contact
7 frequency is available.

8 **National Flight Following Frequency (168.6500 MHz)**

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

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

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

18 **National Interagency Air Tactics Frequencies (166.6750 MHz, 167.9500
19 MHz, 169.1500 MHz, 169.2000 MHz, 170.0000 MHz)**

20 These frequencies are used to support air-to-air or ground-to-air
21 communications on incidents west of the 95th meridian. These frequencies shall
22 be used for air-to-air and ground-to-air communications only. They are not for
23 use as ground tactical operational frequencies.

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

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

29 **National Interagency Airtanker Base Frequency (123.9750 MHz)**

30 This frequency is assigned by the FAA to all airtanker bases (unless otherwise
31 notified) for exclusive use. Use of this frequency is restricted to a radius of 40
32 nautical miles and 10,000 feet MSL from the coordinates of the airtanker base.
33 No other use is authorized.

34 **Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency (168.550 MHz)**

35 BLM and USFS Smokejumpers have been granted exclusive use of primary
36 National air-to-ground tactical frequency 168.550.

1 This frequency is also granted for use, with a separate transmit and receive tone,
2 as a secondary/backup frequency for the BLM and USFS Rappel/Rope Assisted
3 Delivery System (RADS) aerial delivery operations if the local air to ground
4 tactical frequency is being used for initial attack operations and use of that local
5 frequency could cause interference issues.

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

10 **Government-wide Area Common User Frequencies (163.1000 MHz,
11 168.3500 MHz)**

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

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

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

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

22 Not authorized for:

- 23 • Air-to-air communications;
- 24 • Air-to-ground communications; or
- 25 • Radio transmitter power output more than 5 watts.

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

28 **Incident Radio Support**

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

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

1 Military Communications on an Incident

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

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