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## Chapter 15 Communications

### 3 Policy

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

- 5 • Department of Interior, Department Manual, Radio Communications Handbook (377 DM).
- 6
- 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 information needed for the  
24 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-332) at (208) 387-5881.*

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**Controlled Unclassified Information//Basic****1 Radio Frequency Management**

2 In accordance with Executive Order 13556 and USDA/DOI policies and  
3 guidelines, all documents with USDA/DOI frequencies that involve the safety of  
4 life and property must be labeled in accordance with Department of Defense  
5 (DOD) 8500E, National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) 800-53  
6 and the National Archives CUI Marking Handbook v1-1.

7 Therefore, any documents containing frequency information dealing with life  
8 and/or property, whose dissemination is not controlled with a password, must be  
9 labeled at the top and bottom of each page with, **Controlled Unclassified**  
10 **Information//Basic** and controlled as such.

11 Frequency Modulated (FM) and Amplitude Modulated (AM) frequencies are  
12 approved and assigned by a designated Washington Office frequency manager  
13 and managed by state and local Communications Officers. Frequencies shall not  
14 be transmitted without written permission from formally appointed frequency  
15 management personnel at the local, state, regional, or national level.

16 Radio interference must be reported to NIFC CDO (or COMC when assigned)  
17 when adversely impacting incident communications. Minimum reporting  
18 information: location, radio frequency, time and date (including interference  
19 duration), and sound or source for interference.

**20 Daily, Initial Attack and Airtanker Base Frequency Management**

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

25 For air operations, the NIFC CDO coordinates annually with the Forest Service  
26 and Department of Interior (DOI) frequency managers to provide initial attack  
27 (IA) air-to-ground (A/G) FM frequencies, and with the Federal Aviation  
28 Administration (FAA) to provide IA A/A AM and Airtanker Base frequencies.

29 IA A/G FM frequencies are carefully engineered for use by Forest Service and  
30 DOI frequency managers to ensure that the frequencies will not cause  
31 interference to, or, receive interference from, other licensed users. These  
32 frequencies are authorized for use **only** within their assigned frequency zone  
33 boundaries. Any use of these frequencies outside of the frequency zone  
34 boundaries may cause interference with other authorized users and will be  
35 considered a safety violation in regards to the protection of life and/or property  
36 and could have major consequences. Therefore, any changes to dispatch areas  
37 that result in being responsible for areas outside of the existing frequency  
38 boundaries must result in a coordinated effort between dispatch centers,

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1 ensuring that only frequencies assigned within the appropriate frequency zone  
2 are used.

3 On an annual basis the FAA engineers Airtanker Base frequencies and IA A/A  
4 AM frequencies for use by the wildland fire community. The Airtanker Base  
5 frequencies are engineered for use within a 40 nautical mile radius (unless  
6 otherwise specified) from the base center point and the IA A/A AM frequencies  
7 are engineered for use **only** within their assigned frequency zone boundaries.  
8 Both are designed for use below 5,000 feet above ground level (AGL). These  
9 frequencies are engineered by the FAA to minimize the risk of causing  
10 interference with civilian aircraft or airports located within the same geographic  
11 areas. Any use of these frequencies outside of the provided service volume is  
12 considered a major safety violation by the FAA and may result in the removal of  
13 and/or denial of use for those frequencies.

14 All initial attack frequency assignments are depicted on maps disseminated  
15 annually by the CDO through the FTP site. For access to the FTP site contact the  
16 CDO Office.

**27 Mutual Aid Frequency Management**

18 Mutual aid frequency sharing agreements can be made at the local level.  
19 Agreements are only approved in the specific location where assigned.

20 Prohibited:

- 21 • Use of mutual-aid-frequency outside assigned area; and
- 22 • Formal agreements for mutual-aid using NIFC National Fire Frequencies.

23 Exception:

- 24 • Agency with Radio Frequency Authorization (RFA) approved by National  
25 Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) for frequency in NIFC  
26 Channeling Plan; notification and coordination with NIFC CDO required.

**27 Incident Frequency Management**

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

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

- 35 • Frequencies for Type 1 and 2 incidents are assigned by the NIFC CDO and  
36 are managed by a qualified Communications Unit Leader (COML). The  
37 COML will request, assign, and report all frequencies used on the incident

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1 to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of  
2 all aircraft frequencies. Frequency use will be documented on the ICS-205  
3 (Incident Radio Communications Plan) and on ICS-220 (Air Operation  
4 Summary) forms. These completed forms will be made available to incident  
5 personnel in the Incident Action Plan (IAP).

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

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

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

- 14 • The NIICD national frequencies are all committed within a specific  
15 geographic area; and/or
- 16 • New incidents within a complex create a need for additional frequencies;  
17 and/or
- 18 • The fire danger rating is extreme and the potential for additional new  
19 incidents is high; and/or
- 20 • There is frequency congestion due to incidents 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 to the zones, management of those  
25 frequencies is the responsibility of the GACC. Frequencies allocated to  
26 zones for initial attack are not to be dedicated for project fire use. If  
27 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 by agency frequency  
30 managers and coordinated by the NIFC CDO.

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 will be used for emergency  
38 aviation communications. Continuous monitoring of this frequency is mandatory

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1 by agency dispatch centers and aircraft. A Continuous Tone Coded Squelch  
2 System (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz must be used when transmitting on the  
3 National Air Guard Frequency. This frequency must be programmed into the  
4 last channel of every group in fire handheld radios.

5 This frequency, 168.6250 MHz is only used for:

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

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

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

15 The National Flight Following frequency is to be used for flight following,  
16 dispatch, or redirection of aircraft. No other uses, including tactics and logistics,  
17 are authorized.

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

**21 National Interagency Air Tactics Frequencies (166.6125 MHz, 167.9500  
22 MHz, 169.1500 MHz, 169.2000 MHz, 168.4000 MHz)**

- 23 • Frequencies used to support air-to-air or ground-to-air communications on  
24 incidents west of the 95th meridian.
- 25 • Used for air-to-air and ground-to-air communications only.
- 26 • Aircraft radio transmitter power output limit: 10 watts.
  - 27 ○ Prohibited:
    - 28 ■ Use as ground tactical operational channel
    - 29 ■ Use in base station and/or repeater

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

**32 National Interagency Airtanker Base Frequencies**

33 The National Interagency airtanker base frequencies are engineered and  
34 assigned by the FAA frequency managers on a yearly basis. Each frequency is  
35 restricted to a service volume of a 40 nautical mile radius and 10,000 feet mean  
36 sea level (MSL) or 5,000 feet above ground level (AGL) from the specified  
37 latitude and longitude of the airtanker base as annotated in the National  
38 Airtanker Base Directory. NO other frequencies are authorized for this use.

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**Controlled Unclassified Information//Basic****1 Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency (168.5500  
2 MHz)**

3 Assigned to Smokejumpers for DOI, USDA and other agencies. Specifically  
4 dedicated as a smokejumper national air-to-ground tactical channel. Secondary  
5 use is authorized for BLM and USFS Rappel/rope Assisted Delivery System  
6 (RADS) aerial delivery operations. Channel must be toned on both transmit and  
7 receive for all smokejumper and RADS teams to insure that interference issues  
8 are avoided. Smokejumpers will use tone 123.0 and RADS will use 110.9. Use  
9 of this frequency other than for the delivery of aerial firefighters is prohibited.

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

12 These shared frequencies are used on a non-interference basis and are not  
13 exclusive to any user. These frequencies are not to be used for air-to-ground  
14 operations and are prohibited by DOI and USDA from use as a frequency during  
15 operations 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, 168.2000  
19 MHz, 168.6000 MHz, 168.2500 MHz, 166.7250 MHz, 166.7750 MHz)**

20 These shared frequencies are approved for ground tactical operations (line of  
21 sight) on incidents.

22 Prohibited Use:

- 23 • Air-to-air communications; and
- 24 • Air-to-ground communications.

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

**27 Incident Radio Support**

28 All National Incident Radio Support Cache (NIRSC) communications  
29 equipment will be returned to NIFC immediately after the incident is turned over  
30 to the local jurisdictional agency unless otherwise coordinated with the NIICD  
31 CDO/COMC.

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

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**Controlled Unclassified Information//Basic****1 Military Communications on an Incident**

- 2 Military units assigned to an incident are provided NIRSC communications  
3 equipment. Each battalion is typically assigned 80 handheld radios. Intercrew  
4 communications within a military unit is provided by the military on their radios  
5 and frequencies. All incident frequencies are assigned by the COML using form  
6 ICS-205.
- 7 Some military units have aviation VHF-FM radios compatible with civilian  
8 systems. Other units must be provided VHF-FM radios prior to dispatch to an  
9 incident. Wiring harnesses and radios will be resource ordered by the incident.  
10 The resource order will include a request for qualified personnel from NIICD to  
11 perform the installation of the equipment. Equipment will not be sent without  
12 qualified personnel to install it.

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