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Chapter 15 Communications

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Policy

Agency specific policies for radio communications may be found in:

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

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/Smartphone/Satellite Phone Communications

Cellular/smartphone/satellite telephones will not be used to communicate tactical or operational traffic unless no other means are available.

Cellular/smartphone/satellite telephones will not be used for flight following in lieu of normal flight following procedures. Telephone/smartphone/satellite 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 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/resources/NIICD>, or contact your agency Telecommunications Department or the NIICD Engineer at (208) 387-5720.

- *BLM – For information on BLM contracts, software, and hardware requirements and approved radios, contact the Branch of Radio Operations (FA-332) at (208) 387-5881.*

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1 Radio Frequency Management

2 Under Executive Order 13556 and in accordance with DOI/USDA policies and
3 guidelines, all documents which include DOI/USDA frequencies are considered
4 to be Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI) and must be controlled and
5 marked as such following the guidance of the National Archives CUI Marking
6 Handbook Version 1.1.

7 Therefore, any documents containing frequency information whose
8 dissemination is not controlled with a password, must be labeled at the top and
9 bottom of each page with **CUI** and controlled as such.

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

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

19 Daily, Initial Attack and Airtanker Base Frequency Management

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

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

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

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- 1 are used. Updated frequency information is coordinated annually with the
2 GACCs.
- 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.

17 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
38 to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of

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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 in the Incident Action Plan (IAP).

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

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

20 Aviation Operations Frequency Management

- 21 • Air-to-Air – AM frequencies are requested via the NIFC CDO who then
22 coordinates with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Frequencies
23 are engineered by the FAA with a service volume of 20NM radius with
24 5,000ft AGL from incident latitude/longitude or other provided center point.
25 If the needs of the incident require a larger radius, a request should be made
26 through the NIFC CDO to be coordinated with the FAA.
- 27 • Air-to-Ground – FM frequencies will be authorized by agency frequency
28 managers and coordinated and assigned by the NIFC CDO. Frequencies are
29 assigned for incident use with a service volume of 20NM radius from
30 incident latitude/longitude or other provided center point and 3,000ft AGL
31 per agency Radio Frequency Authorization (RFA).

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

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
39 by agency dispatch centers and aircraft. A Continuous Tone Coded Squelch
40 System (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz must be used when transmitting on the

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1 National Air Guard Frequency. This frequency must be programmed into the
2 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 The National Flight Following frequency is to be used for flight following,
14 dispatch, or redirection of aircraft. No other uses, including tactics and logistics,
15 are authorized.

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

19 **Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency (168.5500**
20 **MHz)**

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

28 **Government-wide Area Common User Frequencies (163.1000 MHz,**
29 **168.3500 MHz)**

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

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

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1 **National Interagency Fire Tactical Frequencies (168.0500 MHz, 168.2000**
2 **MHz, 168.6000 MHz, 168.2500 MHz, 166.7250 MHz, 166.7750 MHz)**

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

5 Prohibited Use:

- 6 • Air-to-air communications; and
- 7 • Air-to-ground communications.

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

10 **Incident Radio Support**

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

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

19 **Military Communications on an Incident**

20 Military units assigned to an incident are provided NIRSC communications
21 equipment. Each battalion is typically assigned 80 handheld radios. Intercrew
22 communications within a military unit is provided by the military on their radios
23 and frequencies. All incident frequencies are assigned by the COML using form
24 ICS-205.

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

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