



National Interagency Fire Center

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Area Command Team 4 Briefing Paper

Date: August 30, 2005

Action Item 11

Name: Coordination with Fire Departments

Issue/Topic: Continue and Improve Coordination with Fire Departments

Indicators of Need for Action: In the U.S., local fire departments respond to approximately 1.9 million fires per year with a substantial portion of this protection provided by up to 28,000 rural fire departments. The ability of all fire responders to communicate with each other is a critical component of interagency fire management. Radio compatibility is central to this communication challenge. A multitude of emergency communications systems are currently in use which can lead to frequency interference and lack of interoperability.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) produced a national Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service in December of 2002. NFPA received completed surveys from 12,240 fire departments that provided information on their ability to communicate with federal, state and local partners. Three-fifths to four-fifths say they can communicate at incident scenes with their federal, state, and local partners while only two-fifths say they can communicate with all their partners.

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) published a needs assessment and report to Congress on June 30, 2003 entitled *The Changing Role and Needs of Local, Rural, and Volunteer Fire Departments in the Wildland –Urban Interface*. This assessment recommended actions for implementing a 10 year comprehensive strategy for wildland fire training, efficient interagency response, initial attack/emergency communications ability, and coordinated federal and state assistance. Radio communications for fire departments continues to be one of the top three priorities for federal assistance. The 2002 needs assessment indicated that up to 50% of emergency responders lacked radios and less than 50% of departments can communicate with most of their interagency partners on an incident. Texas Forest Service maintains the national database that was created from the survey. Contact number is 979 458 6509.

Key Points:

- Rural, volunteer, and local fire departments are the nation's first line of defense against fire starts in the Wildland-Urban Interface and surrounding landscapes.
- Many of the local, rural, volunteer fire departments will require additional time to complete transition to narrowband.

- Many fire departments operate on different radio bands such as UHF (400-512 MHZ) or 800 MHZ which complicate communications.
- The fire department land mobile radio systems are used in conventional, analog, and digital modes as well as in trunking mode-in which many users share a common pool of radio channels.
- The multitude of communications systems has led to two primary conflicts: frequency interference and lack of interoperability.
- State forestry agencies often function as the interface between local and federal agencies for radio communications and tactical operations.
- Both of these surveys were conducted prior to the January 2005 transition date of the federal agencies. Federal and state agencies need to recognize the scope of the issue of maintaining communications with local fire departments.

Proposed Action Description: Federal and state programs that provide grant funding for local and rural fire departments to purchase equipment prioritize the acquisition of radio communications technology that will facilitate interoperability between local departments and their state and federal counterparts. Granting agencies also provide policy direction that radios purchased through federal funding must be narrow-band compatible

Local, state, and federal firefighting agencies in each state develop cooperative agreements or plans for interagency frequency use to mitigate interoperable problems and promote efficient frequency utilization and management. The agencies provide training in frequency management and the use of cross-banding/interoperable equipment.

While local fire departments transition to narrowband, state and federal agencies recognize the need and continue to use capabilities for mix mode/cross banding equipment to ensure adequate communications with local fire departments are maintained.

Improving interoperability and public safety communications for the long term requires improved coordination and partnerships, spectrum management, funding, standards and technology and security.

