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Chapter 15 Communications

Policy

- Agency-specific policies for radio communications may be found in:
- *Department of Interior (DOI), 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. Follow the fire dispatch audio tapes records retention and disposition schedule at https://doimspp.sharepoint.com/sites/blm-oc-dirm/BLMrec/Records%20Schedules/Combined_Records_Schedules_01-32.pdf*

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.

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

Radio Frequency Management

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

10 Therefore, any documents containing frequency information whose
11 dissemination is not controlled with a password, must be labeled at the top and
12 bottom of each page with “CUI” and controlled as such.

13 Frequency-modulated (FM) and amplitude-modulated (AM) frequencies are
14 approved and assigned by a designated Washington Office (WO) Frequency
15 Manager and managed by State and local communications officers. Frequencies
16 shall not be transmitted without written permission from formally appointed
17 frequency management personnel at the local, state, regional, or national level.

18 Radio interference must be reported to National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC)
19 communications duty officer (CDO)/communications coordinator (COMC)
20 when assigned) when adversely impacting incident communications. Minimum
21 reporting information: location, radio frequency, time and date (including
22 interference duration), and sound or source for interference.

Daily, Initial Attack and Airtanker Base Frequency Management

24 Frequency assignments for normal daily and initial attack operations are made
25 on a permanent basis and are requested through the normal radio frequency
26 authorization process from the local, State, regional or national level designated
27 frequency management personnel.

28 For air operations, the NIFC CDO coordinates annually with the Forest Service
29 and DOI frequency managers to provide initial attack air-to-ground (A/G) FM
30 frequencies, and with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to provide
31 initial attack air-to-air (A/A) AM and airtanker base frequencies.

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

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1 that result in being responsible for areas outside of the existing frequency
2 boundaries must result in a coordinated effort between dispatch centers,
3 ensuring that only frequencies assigned within the appropriate frequency zone
4 are used. Updated frequency information is coordinated annually with the
5 Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACC).

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

17 All initial attack frequency assignments are depicted on maps disseminated
18 annually by the CDO through the File Transfer Protocol (FTP) site. For access
19 to the FTP site, contact the CDO.

20 **Mutual Aid Frequency Management**

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

23 **Prohibited**

- 24 • Use of mutual-aid-frequency outside assigned area; and
- 25 • Formal agreements for mutual aid using NIFC national fire frequencies.

26 **Exception**

- 27 • Agency with Radio Frequency Authorization (RFA) approved by National
28 Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) for frequency in the
29 NIFC Channeling Plan; notification and coordination with NIFC CDO
30 required.

31 **Incident Frequency Management**

32 National level coordination and assignments of incident frequencies is the
33 responsibility of NIICD and is performed by the NIFC CDO.

34 When communications requirements exceed normal operations, the NIFC CDO
35 may request that GACCs assign a communication coordinator (COMC) to
36 facilitate geographic area frequency management. Additional information is in
37 the *National Interagency Mobilization Guide*.

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- 1 • Frequencies for type 1 and 2 incidents are assigned by the NIFC CDO and
2 are managed by a qualified communications unit leader (COML). The
3 COML will request, assign, and report all frequencies used on the incident
4 to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of
5 all aircraft frequencies. Frequency use will be documented on the ICS-205
6 (Incident Radio Communications Plan) and on ICS-220 (Air Operation
7 Summary) forms. These completed forms will be made available to incident
8 personnel in the incident action plan (IAP).
 - 9 • Type 3 incidents, or other incidents that do not have an assigned COML,
10 will coordinate and request all frequency and communication equipment
11 needs through the COMC and/or the NIFC CDO.
- 12 If additional frequencies are required, the COML will order them through the
13 established ordering process.
- 14 Additional frequencies may be available on a temporary basis and may be
15 requested by the NIFC CDO from the Washington Office (WO) spectrum
16 managers when:
- 17 • The NIICD national frequencies are all committed within a specific
18 geographic area; and/or
 - 19 • New incidents within a complex create a need for additional frequencies;
20 and/or
 - 21 • The fire danger rating is extreme and the potential for additional new
22 incidents is high; and/or
 - 23 • There is frequency congestion due to incidents in close proximity.
- 24 **Aviation Operations Frequency Management**
- 25 • Air-to-air: AM frequencies are requested via the NIFC CDO who then
26 coordinates with the FAA. Frequencies are engineered by the FAA with a
27 service volume of 20 nautical mile (NM) radius with 5,000-feet AGL from
28 incident latitude/longitude or other provided center point. If the needs of the
29 incident require a larger radius, a request should be made through the NIFC
30 CDO to be coordinated with the FAA.
 - 31 • Air-to-ground: FM frequencies will be authorized by agency frequency
32 managers and coordinated and assigned by the NIFC CDO. Frequencies are
33 assigned for incident use with a service volume of 20 NM radius from
34 incident latitude/longitude or other provided center point and 3,000-feet
35 AGL per agency RFA.
 - 36 • With the exception of an emergency, aircraft shall **not** transmit over NIICD
37 command repeaters.
- 38 Both AM and FM aviation frequency assignments will be used on an
39 interagency basis and a master record of these assignments is maintained by the
40 NIFC CDO.

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1 Preassigned National Frequencies**2 National Air Guard Frequency (168.6250 MHz)**

3 A national interagency air guard frequency will be used for emergency aviation
4 communications. Continuous monitoring of this frequency is mandatory by
5 agency dispatch centers and aircraft. A Continuous Tone-Coded Squelch System
6 (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz must be used when transmitting on the National Air
7 Guard Frequency. This frequency must be programmed into the last channel of
8 every group in fire handheld radios.

9 This frequency, 168.6250 MHz, is only used for:

- 10 • Air-to-air emergency contact and coordination;
- 11 • Ground-to-air emergency contact; and
- 12 • Initial call, recall, and redirection of aircraft when no other contact
13 frequency is available.

14 National Flight Following Frequency (168.6500 MHz)

15 The National Flight Following frequency is used to monitor interagency and
16 contract aircraft. All aircraft on point-to-point or mission flights should
17 establish/terminate flight following and confirm Automated Flight Following
18 (AFF) on the National Flight Following frequency.

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

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

**25 Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air-to-Ground Frequency (168.5500
26 MHz)**

27 Frequency 168.5500 MHz is primarily dedicated as a national air-to-ground
28 tactical channel for smokejumper operations within the DOI, USDA, and other
29 agencies. Secondary use is authorized for BLM and USFS Rappel/Rope
30 Assisted Delivery System (RADS) aerial delivery operations. The channel must
31 be toned on both transmit and receive for all smokejumper and RADS teams to
32 ensure that interference issues are avoided. Smokejumpers will use tone 123.0,
33 and RADS will use 110.9. Use of this frequency other than for the delivery of
34 aerial firefighters is prohibited.

**35 Governmentwide Area Common User Frequencies (163.1000 MHz,
36 168.3500 MHz)**

37 Shared frequencies 163.1000 and 168.3500 MHz are used on a non-interference
38 basis and are not exclusive to any user. These frequencies are not to be used for

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- 1 air-to-ground operations and are prohibited by DOI and USDA from use as a
2 frequency during operations involving the protection of life and property.
- 3 • **NOTE:** When traveling between incidents, be sure to monitor for incident
4 radio traffic in the area before using these frequencies.
- 5 **National Interagency Fire Tactical Frequencies**
- 6 Shared frequencies 168.0500 MHz, 168.2000 MHz, 168.6000 MHz, 168.2500
7 MHz, 166.7250 MHz, 166.7750 MHz are approved for ground tactical
8 operations (line of sight) on incidents.
- 9 Prohibited use includes:
- 10 • Air-to-air communications; and
11 • Air-to-ground communications.
- 12 Permission to use these frequencies requires **prior approval** from the NIFC
13 CDO (or COMC when mobilized).

Incident Radio Support

- 15 All National Incident Radio Support Cache (NIRSC) communications
16 equipment will be returned to NIFC immediately after the incident is turned over
17 to the local jurisdictional agency unless otherwise coordinated with the NIICD
18 CDO/COMC.
- 19 To meet the high demand for NIRSC communications equipment during peak
20 fire seasons, please follow the following NIRSC basic operating procedure when
21 shipping communications equipment back to NIFC:
- 22 **Preparedness Level 1-2**
- 23 • Return communications equipment by lowest cost
24 • Return any unused or broken equipment to NIRSC
- 25 **Preparedness Level 3-4**
- 26 • Expedite communications equipment return by best means
27 • Return any unused or broken equipment to NIRSC
28 • Ground freight if possible
29 • Should arrive at NIRSC within 4-5 days
- 30 **Preparedness Level 5**
- 31 • Return communications equipment by fastest means
32 • Return any unused or broken equipment to NIRSC
33 • Overnight NIRSC equipment if possible
34 • Utilize local drivers for GACCs within 8-hour drive time from NIRSC
- 35 **Note:** The ordering incident is responsible for returning and/or coordinating all
36 NIRSC radio equipment directly back to NIFC by; arranging shipping through

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- 1 the local buying team, arranging shipping through the local district office, or
- 2 arranging shipping through the local supply caches.
- 3 NIRSC communications equipment shall NOT be moved from one incident to
- 4 another without being first returned to NIRSC for refurbishment. Unused and
- 5 sealed equipment may be moved, but only upon approval of the NIFC CDO or
- 6 COMC.

7 Military Communications on an Incident

- 8 Military units assigned to an incident are provided NIRSC communications
- 9 equipment. Each battalion is typically assigned 80 handheld radios. Intercrew
- 10 communications within a military unit is provided by the military on their radios
- 11 and frequencies. All incident frequencies are assigned by the COML using form
- 12 ICS-205.
- 13 Some military units have aviation VHF-FM radios compatible with civilian
- 14 systems. Other units must be provided VHF-FM radios prior to dispatch to an
- 15 incident. Wiring harnesses and radios will be ordered by the incident. The
- 16 resource order will include a request for qualified personnel from NIICD to
- 17 perform the installation of the equipment.

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