

3 - Interagency Coordination & Cooperation



Interagency cooperation is vital in attaining fire management program objectives. The ability of a single agency to implement a fire management program is limited without coordination and assistance from other organizations. Interagency cooperation and coordination of shared resources and common activities is imperative at all organizational levels. An understanding of the roles each agency has at each organizational level is necessary to maximize the benefits of interagency coordination and ensure the fulfillment of agency responsibilities.

Interagency Assistance

The authority for interagency agreements is found in the "Interagency Agreement Between the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior and the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture" (1982).

The authority for rendering emergency fire or rescue assistance outside of the Bureau of Land Management is the Reciprocal Fire Protection Act of May 27, 1955 (69 Stat. 66), and the *Departmental Manual*, 910 DM.

Under the Interagency Agreement for Fire Management, BLM supports the Forest Service's efforts in international disaster response. The Forest Service has an agreement with the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) **to support OFDA's international disaster relief activities.**

Coordination

National Level Coordination

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) The NWCG was formed on March 18, 1976, by cooperative agreement between the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior. The purpose of the NWCG is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of all federal and state wildland fire management agencies in the United States. The group accomplishes this goal by coordinating the programs of the participating agencies in order to work together constructively. NWCG provides a formalized system through which agreement may be reached on substantive issues in fire management. Agreed-on policies, standards, and procedures are then implemented directly by each agency. The

Assistant Director, Office of Fire and Aviation Management, is the Bureau's representative on the NWCG.

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The Federal Fire and Aviation Leadership Council The Council is a self-directed group which provides a forum for discussion in which federal issues, both short- and long-term, can be resolved. It is authorized based on the master agreement between the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI) agency directors, dated October 1, 1982. The Council seeks to improve coordination and integration of federal fire and aviation programs, while recognizing individual agency missions. The Council deals with long-term strategic views and fosters improved integrated operations at the national, geographic, and local levels. Teams may be established as needed by the Council to deal with specific federal issues.

The Interior Fire Coordination Committee (IFCC) The IFCC guides and coordinates development of wildland fire policy among the four wildland management agencies in the DOI. The IFCC provides leadership to develop, coordinate, and maintain wildland fire management capabilities, and to standardize procedures, methods, and practices within the DOI. BLM units must comply with these DOI standards. The Assistant Director, Office of Fire and Aviation Management, is the Bureau's representative on the IFCC.

National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) NIFC, located in Boise, Idaho, is a complex of federal agencies with wildland fire responsibilities. The BLM serves as the host for the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The Forest Service (USFS), from the Department of Agriculture, and the National Weather Service (NWS), from the Department of Commerce, are also located at NIFC. These bureaus and agencies form an interagency partnership to provide safe, effective, and efficient policies and guidance, as well as technical and logistical support to the wildland fire management community.

National Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC) Group When National Preparedness reaches levels IV and V, a MAC group is activated and briefings are conducted twice-daily to provide national leadership to establish priorities and direction for wildland fire activities. The national MAC group is comprised of the directors of the BLM, USFS, BIA, NPS, FWS, a State Foresters' representative, and a representative of the NWS.

The BLM, BIA, USFS, NPS, and FWS directors at NIFC have written delegated authority from their respective agency heads to:

- Represent his/her agency on all matters related to wildland fire operations. This includes membership on the national MAC group, determining national priorities, and allocating or reallocating incident resources.

- Represent the state's interests in the absence of the State Foresters' representative, as established in the agreement with the National Association of State Foresters.

Geographic Area Level Coordination

BLM State Offices oversee and facilitate the implementation of interagency standards and policies developed at the national level. Within their geographic areas, State Fire Management Officers (SFMOs) help develop and implement interagency wildland fire management programs to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Through coordination with counterparts from other agencies, SFMOs ensure the bureau contributes appropriately to geographic interagency fire management needs.

Local Level Coordination

Fire management plans, preparedness plans, mobilization guides, cooperative agreements, and other supporting documents identify the necessary local sources, types, and levels of interagency coordination. They also delineate the process whereby compliance with national and geographic area policies and standards will be achieved. Fire Management Officers (FMOs) and their staffs develop and maintain cooperative interagency relationships.

Interagency Mobilization

National Dispatch/Coordination System

The wildland fire dispatch system in the United States has three levels (tiers): national, geographic area, and local level. Logistical dispatch operations occur at all three levels, while initial attack dispatch operations occur primarily at the local level. Any geographic area or local dispatch center using a dispatch system outside the three-tier system must justify, in writing to the national office, why a non-standard system is being used.

The *National Interagency Mobilization Guide*, which is revised annually, describes interagency mobilization and dispatch procedures at all levels. Its directives will be followed by all state and field offices without deviation.

National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) Located in Boise, Idaho, at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), NICC is staffed by personnel from various federal agencies. NICC works with Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs), as well as with other countries (e.g. Canada and Mexico). NICC coordinators also interact with the directors of fire and aviation programs, as well as with the national MAC Group. The principal mission of NICC is to provide cost-effective and timely coordination of national emergency responses for wildfire suppression.

Through the Federal Response Plan, NICC responds to non-fire emergencies when tasked by an appropriate agency such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). NICC also collects, consolidates, and disseminates intelligence information relating to fire and resource status. GACCs provide information to the NICC, where it is consolidated into one national report. This report is sent to the GACCs, agency directors, and Washington Office personnel.

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Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs) There are 11 GACCs, each of which serves a specific geographic portion of the United States. Each GACC interacts with the local dispatch centers, as well as with NICC and neighboring GACCs. Refer to the National Interagency Mobilization Guide for a complete directory of GACC locations, addresses, and personnel. The principal mission of each GACC is to provide the cost-effective and timely coordination of emergency response for all incidents within the specified geographic area. GACCs are also responsible for determining needs, coordinating priorities, and facilitating the mobilization of resources from their areas to other geographic areas. Each GACC prepares an intelligence report that consolidates fire and resource status information received from each of the local dispatch centers in its area. This report is sent to NICC and to the local dispatch centers, caches, and agency managers in the geographic area.

Local Unit/Interagency Dispatch Centers Local dispatch centers are located throughout the country as dictated by the needs of fire suppression agencies. The principal mission of a local dispatch center is to provide safe, timely, and cost-effective coordination of emergency response for all incidents within its specified geographic area. This most often entails the coordination of initial attack responses and the ordering of additional resources when fires escape initial attack. Local dispatch centers are also responsible for supplying intelligence information relating to fires and resource status to their GACC and to their agency managers and cooperators. Local dispatch centers may work for or with numerous agencies, but should only report to one GACC.

Some local dispatch centers are also tasked with law enforcement and agency administrative workloads for non-fire BLM operations; if this is the case, a commensurate amount of funding and training should be provided by the benefitting activity to accompany the increased workload. If a non-wildland fire workload is generated by another (non-BLM) agency operating in an interagency dispatch center, the agency generating the additional workload should offset this increased workload with additional funding or personnel sufficient to enable the BLM to continue fulfilling its fire suppression dispatch responsibilities.

Agreements & Contracts

Field offices are responsible for developing agreements or contracts with local agencies and fire departments to meet mutual needs for suppression and/or prescribed fire services. Concerns of area-wide scope should be addressed through state agreements.

Agreements will be comprised of two components: the actual agreement and an operations plan. The agreement will outline the authority and general responsibilities of each party and the operations plan will define the specific operating procedures.

All appropriate agreements and operating plans will be provided to the servicing dispatch center. The authority to enter into interagency agreements is extensive (reference *BLM Manual 9200*, *Departmental Manual*, *910 DM*, the *Reciprocal Fire Protection Act*, 42 U.S.C. 1856, and the *Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review*).

Mutual Aid Agreements

The national agreement, which serves as an umbrella for interagency assistance among federal agencies, is the "Interagency Agreement Between the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior, and the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture" (1982). This and other national agreements give substantial latitude while providing a framework for the development of state and local agreements and operating plans.

Besides the national agreement, state and local cooperative agreements shall be developed for mutual-aid assistance. These agreements are essential to the fire management program in each field office.

Agreements shall lead to positive interaction among the participating parties by addressing all potential areas of cooperation and coordination in fire management programs.

Agreements Agreements are prepared to enhance safety, effectiveness, and efficiency in fire management operations. The following elements should be addressed in each agreement:

- 1) The authorities appropriate for each party to enter into an agreement.
- 2) The roles and responsibilities of each agency signing the agreement.
- 3) An element addressing the cooperative roles of each participant in prevention, pre-suppression, suppression, fuels, and prescribed fire management operations.

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- 4) Reimbursements/Compensation – All mutually approved operations that require reimbursement and/or compensation will be identified and agreed to by all participating parties through a cost-share agreement. The mechanism and timing of the funding exchanges will be identified and agreed upon.
- 5) Appropriation Limitations – Parties to this agreement are not obligated to make expenditures of funds or reimbursements of expenditures under terms of this agreement unless such funds are appropriated for that purpose by the Congress of the United States of America, by the Counties of _____ by the Cities of _____ and/or the Governing Board of Fire Commissioners of _____.
- 6) Liabilities/Waivers – Each party waives all claims against every other party for compensation for any loss, damage, personal injury, or death occurring as a consequence of the performance of this agreement unless gross negligence on any part of any party is determined.
- 7) Termination Procedure – The agreement shall identify the duration of the agreement and cancellation procedures.
- 8) A signature page identifying the names of the responsible officials should be included in the agreement.

Any agreement which obligates federal funds or commits anything of value, must be signed by the appropriate warranted contracting officer. Specifications for funding responsibilities should include billing procedures and schedules for payment. Any agreement that extends beyond a fiscal year must be made subject to the availability of funds. Any transfer of federal property must be in accordance with federal property management regulations. All agreements must undergo periodic joint review and, as appropriate, revision. The best general reference on agreements is Partnership for Efficiency Through Cooperative Agreements by the NWCG.

Assistance in preparing agreements can be obtained from field or state office fire and/or procurement staff.

Annual Operating Plans Each agreement shall be accompanied by an annual operating plan, which shall be reviewed, updated, and approved annually prior to the fire season. The plan may be amended after a major incident as part of a joint debriefing and review. The plan shall contain detailed, specific procedures which will provide for safe, efficient, and effective operations. The following items shall be addressed in the annual operating plan:

- 1) Responding Party – All parties should be aware that there may be times when the responding party may not have the ability to provide mutual aid. Lack of response could result from limited or unavailable fire suppression personnel

prior to or after fire season, or multiple fires occurring during the fire season. Rural fire districts may also experience their own fire situations and/or may not have adequate numbers of qualified fire personnel or appropriate fire suppression equipment to meet the request. In this case, a secondary request for low exposure equipment, such as a water tender, may be appropriate.

- 2) **Command Structure** – Unified command should be used, as appropriate, whenever multiple jurisdictions are involved, unless one or more parties request a single agency incident commander (IC). If there is a question about jurisdiction, fire managers should mutually decide and agree on the command structure as soon as they arrive on the fire; this decision should be confirmed by agency administrators as soon as possible. Once this decision has been made, the incident organization in use should be relayed to all units on the incident as well as dispatch centers. In all cases, the identity of the IC must be made known to all fireline and support personnel.
- 3) **Communications** – In mutual aid situations, the common designated radio frequency should be a “direct” or “line of sight” frequency. Responding and requesting parties should monitor for any change in weather conditions or safety or emergency situations. Once command decisions are made, they must be transmitted and confirmed over the responding and requesting parties’ tactical frequencies.

Clear text shall be used. Avoid personal “identifiers” and non-ICS acronyms. (For example, a radio transmission such as, “Jones, Dispatch” would likely be meaningless to a mutual aid cooperator who is not familiar with “Jones.”)

Radio protocol and equipment availability/capability might dictate that local fire departments or cooperators and federal resources each use their own tactical frequencies in fire suppression, allowing the “direct” frequency to be the communication link between the responding and requesting parties for command and/or emergency situations. However, continuous use of separate frequencies could result in miscommunication; for this reason, it is important that all agencies change to a single frequency or establish a common communications link as soon as practical.

This paragraph in the annual operating plan shall meet Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requirements for documenting shared use of radio frequencies.

- 4) **Distance/Boundaries** – Responding and requesting parties should identify any mileage limitations from mutual boundaries where “mutual aid” is either pay or non-pay status. Also, for some fire departments, the mileage issue may not be one of initial attack “mutual aid,” but of mutual assistance. In this situation, you may have the *option* to make it part of this agreement or identify it as a situation where the request would be made to the agency having jurisdiction, who would then dispatch the fire department.

- 5) Time/Duration – Responding and requesting parties should identify time limitations (usually 24 hours) for resources in a non-reimbursable status, and “rental rates” when the resources are in a reimbursable status. Use of geographic area interagency equipment rates is strongly encouraged.
- 6) Qualifications/Minimum Requirements – Agreements on minimum qualifications for fire personnel, minimum requirements for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and performance of fire suppression equipment may require some flexibility. The BLM, under the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS) concept, has agreed to accept cooperator's standards. These standards are generally reasonable and should be acceptable for mutual aid.
- 7) Reimbursement/Compensation – Compensation should be “standard” for all fire departments in the geographic area. The rates identified shall be used. Reimbursements should be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, as some fire departments may not expect full compensation but only reimbursement for their actual costs. Also, whenever possible, equipment and operators should be contracted as a unit and paid at a flat rate. Vehicles and equipment operated under the federal excess property system will only be reimbursed for maintenance and operating costs.
- 8) Cooperation – The annual operating plan will be used to identify how the cooperators will share expertise, training, and information on items such as prevention, investigation, safety, and training.

Contracts

Contracts may be used where they are the most cost-effective means for providing fire protection commensurate with established standards. A contract, however, does not absolve an agency administrator of the responsibility for managing a fire program. The office's approved fire management plan must define the role of the contractor in the overall program.

Contracts should be developed and administered in accordance with federal acquisition regulations. In particular, a contract should specify conditions for abandonment of a fire in order to respond to a new call elsewhere.

Emergency Assistance

Emergency assistance may be provided by the BLM to adjacent jurisdictions upon their request, without a formalized agreement. However, to provide safe, efficient, and effective emergency responses, BLM offices must enter into agreements with emergency response agencies. The National Interagency Coordination Center is delegated authority to support non-fire emergencies through several department and bureau manuals, interagency agreements, and memorandums. Local emergency response must be approved by the appropriate agency administrator.

FEMA and the Wildland Fire Program

Under provisions of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster and Emergency Assistance Act (P.L. 93-233, as amended) and Executive Order 12148, Federal Emergency Management (July 20, 1979, as amended), wildland agencies provide assistance to Presidential declared disasters and emergencies nationwide. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is the overall coordinator of the Federal Response Plan (FRP), which guides 26 federal agencies and the American Red Cross in response activities. The FRP is based on the fundamental assumption that a significant disaster or emergency will overwhelm the capability of state and local governments to carry out extensive emergency operations. These operations have been grouped into 12 emergency support functions (ESF); departments and agencies have been assigned primary and support responsibilities for each of these functions.

In the Federal Response Plan, the USFS is the primary agency responsible for ESF #4: Firefighting. **There is one exception. BLM's Alaska Fire Service has the primary agency responsibility for ESF #4 in Alaska. In states other than Alaska**, the BLM has been assigned support responsibility for ESF #4 and for other emergency support activities, as requested.

International Assistance

U.S. - Mexico Cross Border Cooperation on Wildland Fires

In June of 1999, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture signed a *Wildfire Protection Agreement* with Mexico. The Agreement has two purposes:

- 1) To enable wildfire protection resources originating in the territory of one country to cross the United States-Mexico border in order to suppress wildfires on the other side of the border within the zone of mutual assistance (10 miles/16 kilometers) in appropriate circumstances.
- 2) To give authority for Mexican and U.S. fire management organizations to cooperate on other fire management activities outside the zone of mutual assistance.

National Operational Guidelines are being developed for this agreement, which will be put into the National Interagency Mobilization Guide. These guidelines cover issues at the national level and also provide a template for those issues that need to be addressed in local operating plans. The local operating plans identify how the Agreement will be implemented by the Geographical Area Coordination Centers (and Zone Coordination Centers) that have dispatching responsibility on the border. The local operating plans will provide the standard operational procedures for wildfire suppression resources that could potentially cross the U.S. border into Mexico.

U.S. – Canada, Policy for Canadian Support Information about U.S.-Canada cross border support is located in Chapter 40 of the *National Interagency Mobilization Guide*. This chapter provides policy guidance which was determined by an exchange of diplomatic notes between the U.S. and Canada in 1982. This chapter also provides operational guidelines for the *Canada - U.S. Reciprocal Forest Fire Fighting Arrangement*. These guidelines are updated yearly.

BLM Support to International Disasters BLM employees may be requested through the Forest Service, to support the U.S. Government's (USG) response to international disasters by serving on Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs). A DART is the operational equivalent of an ICS team used by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to provide an on-the-ground operational capability at the site of an international disaster. Prior to being requested for a DART assignment, BLM employees will have completed a week-long DART training course covering information about:

- USG agencies charged with the responsibility to coordinate USG responses to international disasters
- The purpose, organizational structure, and operational procedures of a DART
- The positions on a DART that a BLM employee may be requested to fill (based on experience)
- How the DART relates to other international organizations and countries during a deployment

Requests for these assignments are coordinated through the National Office of Fire and Aviation's International Program.

DART assignments should not be confused with technical exchange activities which do not require DART training. More information about the Office of Fire and Aviation's international activities can be found under the National Office of Fire and Aviation webpage on the BLM Intranet site at: <http://web.blm.gov/internal/fire/index.htm/>

