



Interagency Aviation Safety Alert



No. IA 06-05

October 3, 2006

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Subject: Flight Following Procedures utilizing Automated Flight Following

Area of Concern: All Aviation Operations

Distribution: All Aviation Operations and Dispatch/Coordination Centers

Issue: There is growing confusion between flight crews and dispatch centers about flight following procedures utilizing Automated Flight Following (AFF).

Background: Radio congestion on the national flight following and local FM frequencies has created an environment that is distracting flight crews. Dispatch centers have a concern for the ability to ensure that good radio communications are established and maintained. The introduction of the AFF system was intended to reduce the flight following workload but has led to confusion about when radio calls are needed. Some flight crews are not following all AFF procedures; believing that when the AFF unit is on, they do not need to talk to dispatch. In addition, some dispatchers believe that even when they have good AFF data, that 15-minute radio check-ins are essential. As a result, policy interpretations and conflict have resulted between some flight crews and dispatch units.

For wildland fire operations:

- The National Mobilization Guide (NMG), which can be found at the following link, <http://www.nifc.gov/nicc/mobguide/index.html> identifies Automated Flight Following procedures in Chapter 20- Administrative Procedures, Section 24.3.1, pages 52-54.
- Some Geographic Area Mobilization guides, which can be found via the following link, <http://gacc.nifc.gov/> state that, “Pilots will transmit position reports to the appropriate unit dispatcher every 15 minutes while performing the mission.”

For wildland fire and all DOI aviation operations:

- AFF is an accepted method of agency flight following.

Mitigation: To reduce congested radio frequencies, while ensuring that aircraft flight following continues, it is strongly recommended that aircraft and dispatch centers utilize AFF if available. The following points are a review of existing flight following procedures, in addition to some “common sense” approaches to minimize difficulty while flight following:

- Pilots shall make radio contact with the local dispatch center or the flight following contact as soon as practical after takeoff to confirm positive radio communications and AFF status.

- Dispatchers will monitor Web Tracker (AFF program) at a minimum of every 15 minutes for aircraft data. This does not require additional radio communication.
- FM Radio capability between the aircraft and the flight following office (dispatch) is required during the flight. Pilots will monitor the appropriate FM frequency and Guard for the duration of the flight.

NOTE: Aircraft operating under certain USDA-FS Regional or Forest contracts, some Department of the Interior NBC AMD contracts, and the NBC AMD Aircraft Rental Agreement (ARA) may not be required to be equipped with AFF and/or FM radios. Consult the appropriate procurement document for the aircraft in question to determine applicability of the procedure(s) contained in this Interagency Aviation Safety Alert.

- If dispatch or an aircrew has a need to talk via radio at any time during a flight, do so.
- If AFF failure is encountered for an aircraft, the pilot will be notified and 15-minute radio/position checks may be utilized. For Department of the Interior operations, OPM 06-02 paragraph .3 Policy identifies criteria for flight following, including a maximum limit on position reporting, which states that, “When communication is possible, position reporting shall not exceed one-hour intervals under normal circumstances.”
- Pilots will notify dispatch when switching flight following to fire tactical or to controlled FAA airspace.
- If flight following will be handed off to another dispatch center, the center will brief the pilot or flight manager with updated frequencies, call signs and other information as needed.
- When the aircraft has completed the flight and landed, the pilot or flight manager will contact the dispatch office to inform them that they are on the ground.
- Dispatchers that are not currently utilizing AFF may obtain a username and password and take on-line training from the AFF home page at: <https://www.aff.gov/default.asp>

/s/ Robert Galloway
Robert Galloway
Aviation Safety Manager

/s/ Ron Hanks
Ron Hanks
National Aviation Safety
and Training Manager