

Chapter 15 Communications

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/Satellite Phone Communications

Cellular/satellite telephones will not be used to communicate tactical or operational traffic unless no other means are available. Cellular/satellite telephones will not be used for flight following in lieu of normal flight following procedures. Telephone communications may be used for logistical purposes.

- **BLM/FWS/NPS**- *Employees, volunteers, and contractors (for BLM, this includes co-operators) are prohibited from using any mobile voice/data communication or electronic data retrieval device while operating a government owned, leased, or rented vehicle or while operating a personally-owned vehicle for official government business, and are further prohibited from using any government-owned mobile communication or data retrieval device while operating a personally-owned vehicle. Government purchased two-way radios are exempt from this requirement. The use of any of these devices during an emergency situation (immediate threat to life) is limited to the extent necessary to convey vital information. When there is a passenger in the vehicle and the vehicle is in motion, the passenger shall manage communications to prevent driver distraction.*
- **FS**- *Drivers shall not engage in cellular phone or mobile radio communications while the vehicle is in motion unless actively engaged in an emergency such as wildland firefighting. During non-emergency situations, the driver shall identify a safe location to stop the vehicle and then engage in cellular phone or mobile radio communications. These restrictions apply whether or not hands-free technology is available.*

1 Radio Communications

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3 Radio communications provide for the flow of tactical information needed for
4 the command/control of personnel and resources.

- 5 • **BLM/FWS-** *To ensure safe and efficient suppression operations, all*
6 *BLM/FWS fire resources will use a standard GPS datum and*
7 *latitude/longitude (coordinate) format when communicating GPS*
8 *references. The standard datum is WGS84, and the standard coordinate*
9 *format is Degrees Decimal Minutes (DDM). For other activities (e.g.*
10 *mapping, fire reporting, planning), agency standards will apply.*

11

12 Radio Contracts

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14 Radios used for fire and aviation activities must be approved by the National
15 Interagency Incident Communication Division (NIICD). Information on
16 contracts, software, hardware requirements and approved radios is available at:
17 <http://www/nifc.gov/NIICD/documents.html>, or contact your agency
18 Telecommunications Department or the National Interagency Fire Center
19 Communications Duty Officer (NIFC CDO) at (208) 387-5644.

- 20 • **BLM -** *For information on BLM contracts, software, and hardware*
21 *requirements and approved radios, contact the Branch of Radio Operations*
22 *(FA-350) at (208) 387-5830.*

23

24 Radio Frequency Management

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26 FM frequencies are authorized and assigned by the designated Washington
27 Office frequency manager and managed by the state and local Communications
28 Officers. Frequencies shall not be used without express permission from the
29 local, state, regional, or national level designated frequency management
30 personnel.

31

32 Daily Operational Frequency Management

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

37

38 Air operations initial attack frequencies, both AM and FM, will be assigned by
39 the NIFC CDO. These assignments will be on an interagency basis and
40 coordinated with the Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs).

41

42 Mutual Aid Frequency Management

43 Mutual aid frequency sharing agreements can be made at the local level.
44 However, mutual-aid frequency sharing agreements are only valid in the specific

1 location where they originated. These agreements do not authorize the use of a
2 shared frequency other than in the specified local area.

3

4 NIFC national fire frequencies are not to be used for these agreements. The
5 only exception may occur when an agency holds a National
6 Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) Radio Frequency
7 Authorization (RFA) for a frequency that is included in the NIFC Channeling
8 Plan. If this occurs, notification and coordination with the NIFC CDO is
9 requested.

10

11 **Incident Frequency Management**

12 National level coordination and assignments of incident frequencies is the
13 responsibility of the National Interagency Incident Communications Division
14 (NIICD) and is managed by the NIFC CDO.

15

16 When communications requirements exceed normal operations, the NIFC CDO
17 may request that GACCs assign a Communication Coordinator (COMC) to
18 facilitate geographic area frequency management. Additional information may
19 be found in the *National Interagency Mobilization Guide*.

- 20 • Frequencies for Type 1 and 2 incidents are assigned by the NIFC CDO and
21 are managed by a qualified Communications Unit Leader (COML). The
22 COML will request, assign, and report all frequencies used on the incident
23 to the NIFC CDO/COMC. This will include the request and assignment of
24 all aircraft frequencies. Frequency use will be documented on the ICS-205
25 Incident Radio Communications Plan and on ICS-220 Air Operation
26 Summary forms. These completed forms will be made available to incident
27 personnel.
- 28 • Type 3 incidents, or other incidents that do not have an assigned COML,
29 will coordinate and request all frequency and communication equipment
30 needs through the COMC and/or the NIFC CDO.

31

32 If additional frequencies are required, the COML will order them through the
33 established ordering process.

34

35 Additional frequencies for any operation may be available on a temporary basis,
36 and may be requested by the NIFC CDO from the Washington Office Spectrum
37 managers when:

- 38 • The NIICD national frequencies are all committed within a specific
39 geographic area;
- 40 • New incidents within a specific complex create a need for additional
41 frequencies;
- 42 • The fire danger rating is extreme and the potential for additional new
43 incidents is high; and/or
- 44 • When there is frequency congestion due to significant numbers of incidents
45 in close proximity.

46

1 Aviation Operations Frequency Management

- 2 • Air to Air initial attack –AM frequencies are assigned yearly to the GACC’s
3 by the NIFC CDO in coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration
4 (FAA). Once assigned, management of those frequencies is the
5 responsibility of the GACC and may be allocated to zones. Frequencies
6 allocated to zones for initial attack are not to be dedicated for project fire
7 use. If additional frequencies are required, they must be requested from and
8 assigned by the NIFC CDO.
- 9 • Air to Ground –FM frequencies will be assigned and coordinated by the
10 NIFC CDO and agency frequency managers.

11
12 Both AM and FM aviation frequency assignments will be used on an
13 interagency basis and a master record of these assignments is maintained by the
14 NIFC CDO. Updated frequency information is coordinated annually with the
15 GACC’s.

17 Pre-assigned National Frequencies**19 National Air Guard Frequency (168.6250 MHz)**

20 A National Interagency Air Guard frequency for aircraft will be used for
21 emergency aviation communications. Continuous monitoring of this frequency
22 in narrowband mode is mandatory by agency dispatch centers. Transmission on
23 this frequency must include the Continuous Tone Coded Squelch System
24 (CTCSS) tone of 110.9 Hz.

25
26 This frequency, 168.6250 MHz is restricted to the following use:

- 27 • Air-to-air emergency contact and coordination;
28 • Ground-to-air emergency contact; and
29 • Initial call, recall, and re-direction of aircraft when no other contact
30 frequency is available.

32 National Flight Following Frequency (168.6500 MHz)

33 The National Flight Following Frequency is used to monitor interagency and
34 contract aircraft. This frequency is used for flight following and official aircraft
35 flying point to point; it is not to be used during mission flights or incident
36 operations.

37
38 All dispatch centers/offices will monitor the national flight following frequency
39 at all times. A CTCSS tone of 110.9 must be placed on the transmitter and
40 receiver of the National Flight Following frequency.

41
42 This frequency 168.6500 MHz is restricted to the following use:

- 43 • Flight following, dispatch, and/or re-direction of aircraft;
44 • Air-to-ground and ground-to-air administrative traffic; and

- 1 • Not authorized for ground-to-ground traffic.

2

3 **National Interagency Air Tactics Frequencies (166.6750 MHz, 167.9500**
4 **MHz, 169.1500 MHz, 169.2000 MHz, 170.0000 MHz)**

5 These frequencies are used to support air-to-air or ground-to-air
6 communications on incidents west of the 95th meridian. These frequencies shall
7 be used for air-to-air and ground-to-air communications only. They are not for
8 use as ground tactical operational frequencies.

9

10 Transmitter power output of radios installed in aircraft utilizing these
11 frequencies shall be limited to 10 watts. Use of these frequencies in base
12 stations and repeaters is prohibited.

13

14 These frequencies will be assigned by the NIFC CDO or in coordination with
15 the local unit if a NTIA-RFA is in effect.

16

17 **National Interagency Airtanker Base Frequency (123.9750 MHz)**

18 This frequency is assigned by the FAA to all airtanker bases (unless otherwise
19 notified) for exclusive use. Use of this frequency is restricted to a radius of 40
20 nautical miles and 10,000 feet MSL from the coordinates of the airtanker base.
21 No other use is authorized.

22

23 **Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS Air to Ground Frequency (168.550 MHz)**

24 BLM and USFS Smokejumpers have been granted exclusive use of primary
25 National Air to Ground tactical frequency 168.550.

26

27 This frequency is also granted for use, with a separate transmit and receive tone,
28 as a secondary/backup frequency for the BLM and USFS Rappel/Rope Assisted
29 Delivery System (RADS) aerial delivery operations if the local air to ground
30 tactical frequency is being used for initial attack operations and use of that local
31 frequency could cause interference issues.

32

33 Use of this frequency for other than the delivery of aerial firefighters is
34 prohibited. This frequency must be toned (CTCSS, transmit and receive) for
35 Smokejumper and Rappel/RADS crews to ensure that interference issues are
36 avoided. Smokejumpers will use tone 123.0 and Rappel/RADS crews will use
37 tone 110.9.

38

39 **Government-wide Area Common User Frequencies (163.1000 MHz,**
40 **168.3500 MHz)**

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

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

- 1 **National Interagency Fire Tactical Frequencies(168.0500 MHz, 168.200**
2 **MHz, 168.6000 MHz, 168.2500 MHz, 166.7250 MHz, 166.7750 MHz)**
3 These frequencies are used to support ground tactical operations (line of sight)
4 on incidents.
5
6 They are not authorized for:
7 • Air to air communications;
8 • Air to ground communications;
9 • Mobile radios with more than 5 watts output power;
10 • Base stations; or
11 • Repeater frequencies.
12
13 Use of these frequencies will be coordinated between the COML and the NIFC
14 CDO/COMC. Power output is limited to 5 watts or less.
15

16 **Incident Radio Support**

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18 All National Incident Radio Support Cache (NIRSC) communications
19 equipment will be returned to NIRSC at NIFC immediately after the incident is
20 turned over to the jurisdictional agency.
21
22 No cache communications equipment shall be moved from one incident to
23 another without being first returned to NIRSC for refurbishment. Unused and
24 red-sealed equipment may be moved, but only upon approval of the NIFC CDO
25 or COMC.
26

27 **Military Communications on an Incident**

- 28
29 Military units assigned to an incident are assigned radios approved for use on
30 incidents. Each battalion is typically assigned 80 handheld radios. Sixteen of
31 these radios are used by military crew liaisons. Intercrew communications
32 within a military unit is provided by the military on their radios using their
33 frequencies. All frequency assignments at the incident will be made by the
34 COML in accordance with the ICS-205.
35
36 Some military units have aviation VHF-FM radios compatible with civilian
37 systems. Other units must be provided VHF-FM radios prior to dispatch to an
38 incident. Wiring harnesses and radios will be resource ordered by the incident.
39 The resource order will include a request for qualified personnel from NIICD to
40 perform the installation of the equipment. Equipment will not be sent without
41 qualified personnel to install it.