



## Interagency Media Guidelines for Wildland Fires March 19, 2004

### General Policy

- It is the policy of federal and state agencies to provide news media access to incidents including wildland fires, prescribed fires and wildland fire-use fires.
- Federal and state agencies are required to provide equitable and maximum news media access to wildland fire incidents.
- For the purposes of these guidelines, news media representatives include print and broadcast reporters; freelance print reporters; freelance videographers; and photographers.
- While the wildland firefighting agencies seek to provide safe access to incidents for news media representatives, the ultimate responsibility for their safety lies with the individual reporter and their employer.

### Proposed Guidelines

#### *Access*

- Visits to the fireline must receive the approval of the incident commander or designated representative.
- News media will be escorted by a person qualified as a single resource boss or other appropriate escort approved by the incident commander. The incident commander may delegate escort approval authority to other incident personnel, such as the lead Information Officer or appropriate local authority.

#### *Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)*

- News media representatives will be required to wear PPE as outlined in the Fireline Handbook and the Interagency Standards for Fire and Aviation Operations (the "Red Book") when working within the fire perimeter, and have an appropriate safety briefing. PPE must meet National Fire Protection Association/National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards. The required PPE is:
  - 8-inch high, lace-type work boots with non-slip, melt-resistant soles and heels.
  - Aramid shirts
  - Aramid trousers
  - Hard hat with chinstrap
  - Leather gloves

- Fire shelter
- Water canteen

PPE may be provided by the fire organization if media representatives are unprepared.

### *Firefighter Training*

- News media representatives are invited to join in basic firefighter courses with federal and state providers, if there is sufficient room for them.
- These courses are voluntary. Attending them is not a guarantee of access, nor an endorsement of safety accreditation, but rather is an opportunity for information and education. Reporters can also be referred to authorized contract trainers or the academic community for basic firefighter courses.
- NWCG member agencies will not administer the work-capacity test to news media representatives because of liability concerns.

### *“Shadowing” Fire Crews*

- Incident personnel will facilitate in-depth coverage opportunities for journalists. News media representatives requesting to “shadow” crews for more than one operational period on the fireline or in the fire area must:
  - Wear personal protective equipment and understand how to use it.
  - Coordinate activities with the lead Information Officer, who will communicate with the affected crew boss, incident commander, and the fire management officer at the crew’s home unit.
- It is strongly recommended that reporters requesting to shadow crews complete basic firefighter training including S-130 and S-190. If these courses have been taken in a previous year, a current refresher course is recommended. News media representatives must be able to walk in mountainous terrain, be in good physical condition, with no known limitations.

### *Red Cards in the Incident Command System*

- News media representatives will not be issued “red cards” under the Incident Command System. The red-card system was designed for incident personnel with specific duties for which they are trained and qualified, and not for non-incident personnel.

### *Existing Laws and Policies*

- These guidelines apply to all fires under federal or state jurisdiction, but are not intended to supersede existing tribal laws; state laws, such as media access laws in California; or chain-of-command procedures relevant to military crews.

### *Denial of Access*

- Denial of access will be a rare occurrence. News media access may be limited when the Incident Commander determines:
  - Safety of firefighters or others may be compromised. Considerations should be much the same as those when it is deemed unsafe for fire crews to be on the fireline such as extreme fire behavior, expected change in the weather, and so forth.
  - The presence of non-fire personnel compromises incident operations.
  - The presence of non-fire personnel compromises the integrity of an investigation.
  - A violation of security or privacy of incident personnel would occur.
- Federal and state agencies will support decisions regarding access by other jurisdictions, such as a private landowner, tribal entity, or local law enforcement agency.
- Reasons for denial of access should be documented by the lead information officer and become part of the unit log.
- News media aviation resources must determine and abide by airspace restrictions that may be implemented by the FAA at the request of fire managers.

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## **Questions and Answers Media Access Guidelines**

March 19, 2004

**Q:** Why were these guidelines produced?

**A:** Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth received a small number of complaints by reporters in the Southwest regarding access to wildland fires. The reporters believed that there were inconsistent approaches to providing opportunities to cover various aspects of wildland fires.

**Q:** Who produced the guidelines?

**A:** Chief Bosworth brought the media access issue to the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) in January 2004, and the council asked NWCG Chair Jim Stires to develop interagency guidelines. Stires then tasked Don Smurthwaite, BLM External Affairs, and Rose Davis, Forest Service Public Affairs, to take the lead in creating the guidelines in conjunction with the NWCG Safety and Health and Incident Operations working teams.

**Q:** Were the guidelines accepted?

**A:** NWCG approved the guidelines in late January and sent them on to WFLC for approval at its February 2004 meeting. WFLC provide some clarification suggestions that were incorporated on March 19, 2004 when the guidelines were accepted.

**Q:** What do the guidelines do?

**A:** The guidelines are designed to bring consistency to IMTs and local units in responding to media requests by specifying that it is interagency policy to provide access at all times unless there are overriding safety concerns. They articulate the interagency policy and practices for access, safety, training, and red cards. The guidelines are designed to be general in nature so that Incident Commanders and IIOs can use their judgment based on each situation. Each fire and each community is different, and the creators wanted the IIOs to have flexibility in how to provide service, but with the understanding that they are directed to provide service to journalists.

**Q:** What is the basis for these guidelines?

**A:** The guidelines are based on the current curriculum concepts presented in S-203 and S-403 for Incident Information Officers. They further include direction regarding media on the fireline presented in the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations (the Red Book) and the Fireline Handbook. They are also based on experience from the NIFC External/Public Affairs office and NWCG operations personnel and input from field IIOs.

**Q:** Do the guidelines differ from the current procedures?

**A:** Not much. As noted above, the guidelines are based on the training given to IIOs, and current practices. What is different is that reporters will no longer receive red cards after taking the firefighter training (S-130, S-190) and that federal and state agencies will no longer administer the Work Capacity test due to liability concerns. Remember, there were over 60,000 large fires in 2002 and there were very few complaints. There is no apparent reason to dramatically change our procedures.

**Q:** Are reporters required to take basic firefighter training?

**A:** Definitely NOT. Reporters are invited to take wildland fire training as it offers a good basis for their coverage of fire management, provides a clearer understanding of the safety concepts (LCES, the 10 & 18, risk assessment), and helps build relationships with public affairs and fire management personnel on local units. Reporters will not be denied equitable access if they have not taken the basic firefighter training.

**Q:** Why can't reporters get red cards?

**A:** Reporters should not have received red cards in the past. First, the red cards document qualifications for federal and contract firefighting personnel to determine appropriate assignments. Reporters will never have fire assignments and are not federal employees. Second, reporters can document their successful completion of training by bringing the certificates with them to a fire. Third, the red cards and completion of basic firefighting training does not provide any better access to wildland fires for those reporters who attended training, than the reporters who did not. IIOs are expected to provide the best access and service possible, within safety parameters, to ALL media who request it.

**Q:** Why do the guidelines mention denial of access?

**A:** Denial of access or assistance to reporters should be a rare occurrence, and based on decisions made by the Incident Commander or cooperating agency. For example, federal IIOs will not assist with access into areas that are closed by a local Sheriff or a Tribal authority.

**Q:** Why do the guidelines include coordinating with the home unit and the crew boss if reporters want to shadow a crew for a couple of days?

**A:** Primarily out of courtesy to the home unit. The Fire Management Officer who oversees that crew may have information about specific issues that the crew is dealing with that would make them unsuitable for the added risk of distraction by reporters. The PAOs at NIFC will assist field FIOs in acquiring those clearances to take the added task off the FIO.

Also, because firefighters are public safety officers, the crew bosses will, in most cases, provide for the safety of his/her crew *and* the reporter if an emergency arises. An example is the 30-Mile fire incident when a crewmember shared her fire shelter with two civilians to protect them during a blowup. The crew boss should be comfortable with this added risk.

**Q:** Since the guidelines indicate that reporters and their media outlets are primarily responsible for the reporters' safety, why do you have these guidelines at all?

**A:** The guidelines provide an interagency, consistent approach to media access for all IMTs on all wildland fire incidents, and reinforce the importance of media escorts. The escorts are the conduits of information about the current incident, and provide coordination with operations for fireline visits to enhance the safety of reporters. While reporters concentrate on gathering their story elements, the escort is responsible for situational awareness and communications to alert the reporters about any change in fire behavior that could create a more dangerous situation.

**Q:** Are the guidelines simply a means of denying reporters access to the fireline?

**A:** No. The guidelines should help reporters gain *better* access to the fireline. The guidelines firmly state that the federal and state agencies' policy is to provide and assist with media access, and that denial should rarely occur, and then only for specific reasons that must be documented.