Confusion in the World of Wildland Fire Radio Communication

On what was my first day on the job in an Idaho BLM fire dispatch center in 1984, I was tasked with monitoring radio traffic while my supervisors attended a meeting. Shortly after my supervisors departed, a resource advisor radioed dispatch. His vehicle had started a fire, or was that "afire"? I wasn't sure if his vehicle was on fire and I should notify the rural fire department or if the desert was on fire and I needed to send wildland fire engines. With additional information exchange, I determined that the vehicle's catalytic convertor had started a grass fire and wildland fire engines were needed as the fire had grown beyond the resource advisor's capabilities.

My communication problems didn't stop there. The Bureau was in the midst of transitioning to a new communication model called "clear text," but local engine operators were still using 10-code communications with one operator giving a very clear "10-8" as he responded to the incident. The next operator radioed that he was "en route," and a 10-code reference card on the radio console confirmed 10-8's meaning for me. Confusing verbiage, numerical or crew-specific code talk, or even today's newest communication tool called texting can produce unintended communication problems.

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There are those in our midst that say the 10-code system was a more concise method of communicating and freed the airwaves for more important information transfer. There are others that contend the 10 code was a safety concern, lacking across-the-board-standardization and more importantly that you had to know the code in order to communicate. Whatever your opinion, the Incident Command System (ICS) requires the use of "clear text" or common terminology across all jurisdictions.

Although wildland fire personnel are taught about proper radio communication in wildland fire courses, report after report lists "poor communications" as a causal factor in accidents and fatalities. Poor communications can be anything from frequency overlap, long-winded or unnecessary transmissions, to misinterpretation of radio messages.

Effective, efficient communication skills is something that each wildland firefighter has the ability and responsibility to develop. In the coming months, BLM Fire Training will embark on a project to identify and create tools that wildland firefighters can utilize to improve their radio discipline. BLM fire personnel are asked to provide input into the project through the *Building Our Future Through Innovation* program (see page 4 for more information).

The first phase of the project is research and awareness. BLM Fire Training staff are in the process of benchmarking organizations outside the wildland fire service. To date they have gained valuable insight that may prove beneficial to how BLM wildland firefighters can improve their radio discipline.

Training officers are encouraged to use the information found within this newsletter as a radio communications refresher/tailgate topic tool until more formal products are developed. During these sessions BLM leaders should focus on practice, assessment and personal example--exhibit effective and efficient radio discipline, conduct crew radio communications assessments, foster proper radio discipline at the lowest levels of the organization, and hold radio discipline practice sessions and assessments.

Whether a leader of one or a leader of organizations, creating a culture of respectful, effective communication is a duty of all BLM wildland firefighters.

Contributed by Pam McDonald, Writer/Editor, BLM Fire Training Unit