



Tune In to *Radio Discipline*

TUNE IN TO RADIO DISCIPLINE

Radio discipline means properly using handheld, mobile and base station radios. In recent years, communication managers have noticed a sharp decline in radio discipline across the country. One of the trends they've noted is an increase in excessive or pointless talk over the radio. Professional wildland firefighters have to pay attention to this issue.

FIREFIGHTERS HAVE USED RADIOS FOR DECADES. WHY IS "RADIO DISCIPLINE" A PROBLEM NOW?

Radio discipline has become a problem in recent years for several reasons:

- Technology has opened the communication floodgates. Nowadays, people expect to be able to communicate more, not less.
- Experts estimate the number of radios in use in wildland fire suppression has tripled over the past 20 years.
- Placing a radio in someone's hands predisposes that person to use the radio—sometimes regardless of the necessity to transmit.

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BLM-FA-AE-10-001-1292





SO WHAT? WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL WITH FIREFIGHTERS USING THEIR RADIOS A LOT? ISN'T THAT WHAT RADIOS ARE FOR?

Excessive radio transmission isn't just irritating. It creates some potentially serious outcomes.

First, research strongly suggests that constant speaking over the radio (or a cell phone, for that matter) can siphon a firefighter's attention away from the fire environment. Researchers believe a person's attention is like a well from which only one bucket at a time can effectively dip. Stick too many buckets in your "well" of attention at once, and none of them will fill up.

Second, overabundant radio traffic clogs the airwaves and can force necessary communication to wait in line or just get

HOW DO I IMPROVE MY RADIO DISCIPLINE?

You can do a lot to help improve radio discipline. Here are four good suggestions.

1. Train and practice radio use skills. Describing to a helicopter pilot exactly where you'd like a bucket drop, for example, is a skill. Your description must be clear, it has to make sense to the pilot (who sees things differently than you do—literally), and it needs to be expressed quickly. Practice describing target locations using headings tied to the hours on a clock ("Turn to your three o'clock now.") or using prominent landmarks ("When you're over the meadow, fly upslope to the base of the rock slide.")
2. Discipline yourself to think through what you want to say before keying the microphone. Time is wasted—and confusion is created—when people talk over the radio without knowing what they want to say. Radios are not good tools for thinking

ignored. One analysis of radio traffic found that up to 12% of radio messages went unacknowledged. This is a significant safety issue, because communication isn't communication if it isn't being heard.

Third, crowded airwaves are frustrating and can trigger requests for more frequencies on incidents. Frequencies, however, are finite resources just like engines, crews and aircraft. Additional frequencies simply may not be available.

Using home unit frequencies on out-of-town fire assignments is not the answer. Radio frequencies are authorized for use in certain locations. You can use your "home" frequencies only on your home unit, because those frequencies are probably in use in dozens of other regions. Not only is using a "home unit" frequency in another part of the country illegal, it can cause serious communication and safety glitches.

around. In fact, some experts even recommend practicing a critical message once or twice just before transmitting.

3. Transmit only when you need to. Not all fireline communication needs to go over the radio. If you need to use the radio, use it. Hold side conversations off the airwaves.

4. Be a professional. Maintain your composure, be prepared, be concise and above all, be clear. Radio communication is almost purely verbal; the non-verbal clues we all unconsciously use in face-to-face communication simply aren't there.

Radios are fantastic tools, and the radio communication system used on incident management across the United States is world-class. However, the system's effectiveness can be hobbled when its users practice poor radio use habits. Spread the word, and help keep our radio system tuned in to success.