

## **COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION**

### **1 Introduction**

Communicating and educating about wildland fire is a key component of the National Park Service Wildland Fire Management Program. Facilitating, coordinating, and supporting communication and outreach with internal and external audiences increases understanding and support for wildland fire and wildland fire management practices. A comprehensive communication and education program emphasizes the entire scope of wildland fire management activities, particularly the role of fire in ecosystems where appropriate.

Communication and education needs related to wildland fire management vary depending on the specific program, the geographic area, and the stated objectives. The intent of this chapter is to accomplish the following:

1. Articulate the NPS commitment to communicate about wildland fire.
2. Present a brief overview of communication planning, crisis communication, and media relations (see sections 3–5).
3. Provide references that can serve the fire community in the communication effort:

To achieve a truly integrated interdisciplinary wildland fire management program, communication is critical. Fire communication, education, and the dissemination of information regarding wildland fire management is the responsibility of a wide variety of employees within and outside of fire management at the park, zone, fire planning unit, regional, and national levels. Every function within the program has communication responsibilities. The complexity of wildland fire management in the twenty-first century requires commitment to communicating with and educating the public. Doing so improves the ability to preserve, protect, and restore National Park Service resources, and enables the manager to effectively communicate risk management, firefighter safety, and public safety. An important aspect of wildland fire communication and education is related to the prevention of unwanted human-caused wildfires. More information related to this may be found in the *Prevention and Mitigation Chapter of RM 18*.

Wildland fire is very infrequently part of a park's key themes, therefore communication and education about wildland fire at the unit level begins with the fire management plan and those objectives outlined in the plan. The Introduction chapter for *RM 18* emphasizes three strategic objectives based on federal fire cohesive strategic goals. Communication, education, and outreach should reflect these objectives as well.

Incident and project related communication efforts are essential. In addition, implementation of broad programmatic communication and education efforts enhances public support and understanding of fire management actions. A comprehensive, well planned, and interdisciplinary communication and education program facilitates and enhances the entire wildland fire program at all levels of the National Park Service.

## **2      Responsibilities**

### **2.1    National Level**

Responsibilities at the national level include the following:

- Overseeing the NPS Fire Communication and Education Program and the day-to-day administration.
- Identifying and supporting Servicewide priorities and fire management initiatives.
- Serving as an advocate for fire communication and education programs, media development, and comprehensive fire communication planning throughout the Service.
- Providing interdisciplinary coordination with other Servicewide programs relative to wildland fire management.
- Serving as a member of an interagency team to direct fire communication, education, and information at the national level.

### **2.2    Regional Level**

Responsibilities at the regional level include the following:

- Serving as a resource to the parks in the region and coordinating all matters relating to fire communication and education.
- Serving as an advocate for integrated programs within the region.
- Seeking interdisciplinary coordination with other regional programs relative to fire communication and education in the parks.
- Assisting parks in using ongoing communication and education strategies, consultation, and collaboration to enhance fire management programs.
- Assisting parks in compliance with Department of the Interior and Servicewide communication policies and standards.
- Identifying regional fire communication and education priorities and initiatives.
- Collaborating with national NPS Fire Communication and Education Program for cohesive implementation of initiatives and projects.

## 2.3 Park Level

Responsibilities at the park level include the following:

- Creating, planning, and managing a fire communication and education program that fosters an ongoing dialogue with the public to accomplish park fire management objectives and supports regional and national goals.
- Making effective decisions about delivery of messages including the use and balance of personal and non-personal services and appropriate media.
- Creating and prioritizing an annual plan of work to accomplish goals and objectives outlined in the park's fire management plan.
- Providing an ongoing evaluation of all park-level fire communication and education services to ascertain effectiveness with varied audiences.
- Collaborating with regional and/or national NPS Fire Communication and Education Program for cohesive implementation of initiatives and projects.

## 3 Communication Planning

There are a variety of wildland fire management communication needs, including communication on prevention, mitigation, prescribed fire, and suppression efforts. A unit may not require planning for every one of these areas; hence this section is designed to provide an outline of key concepts that may be included in any communication plan, including fire situations.

The key concepts of a fire communication plan include the following:

- Situation Analysis
- Objectives
- Audiences
- Messages
- Strategies
- Tactics
- Timeline
- Evaluation
- Budget

Communication plan styles may vary depending upon the desired results, programmatic needs, immediacy of the event, and what works for the individual or group involved. While the style and/or goal of the plan may be different in each situation, the principles of communication planning remain the same. Overall, a clear plan enhances communication efforts by providing a road map to focus on the important issues and by ensuring a consistent message and delivery to key audiences. Systematic communication planning is essential for wildland fire

messages to become heard and acted upon, and to build support for fire management policies and practices. Building rapport and trust takes time, and with time the credibility of the organization will follow.

### 3.1 Situation Analysis

The Situation Analysis presents what is known about the current environment in which outreach will be conducted, including social, economic, and related factors, and the expected goal for outreach.

For example, when developing a plan to communicate with residents about a prescribed burn in their area, provide an overview of the community and background on how residents might view the project. Has there been a large fire recently that caused heightened concern? Have residents been vocal about prescribed burns in the past? Are they educated about the need for a prescribed burn? Is smoke management an issue?

Consider the following factors when preparing a situation analysis:

- *Audience Analysis*: General analysis of target audiences.
- *Social Data*: What is the pulse of the affected community?
- *Political Data*: What are the federal, state, and local legal guidelines, organizational and agency missions, and local community concerns?
- *Economic Data*: What are the real and perceived economic impacts of fire events?
- *Organization Data*: What knowledge and skill sets are needed to communicate the issues?
- *Ecological Data*: What is known about the ecological history of the ecosystem, including the historical fire regimes?

Data should not be equated with knowledge or understanding of the situation. Data only becomes information after it is synthesized within the context of the bigger questions.

### 3.2 Objectives

The objectives outline exactly what the plan aims to accomplish. Objectives should be specific and measurable, which also helps in gauging the success of the implementation efforts.

Example objectives:

1. Increase community awareness about the long-term benefits of prescribed burns by 25 percent over a two-year period.

2. Generate support from community leaders, elected officials, and other influencers in fire management planning efforts.
3. Increase website traffic from 20,000 to 25,000 visitors per month by fiscal year-end.

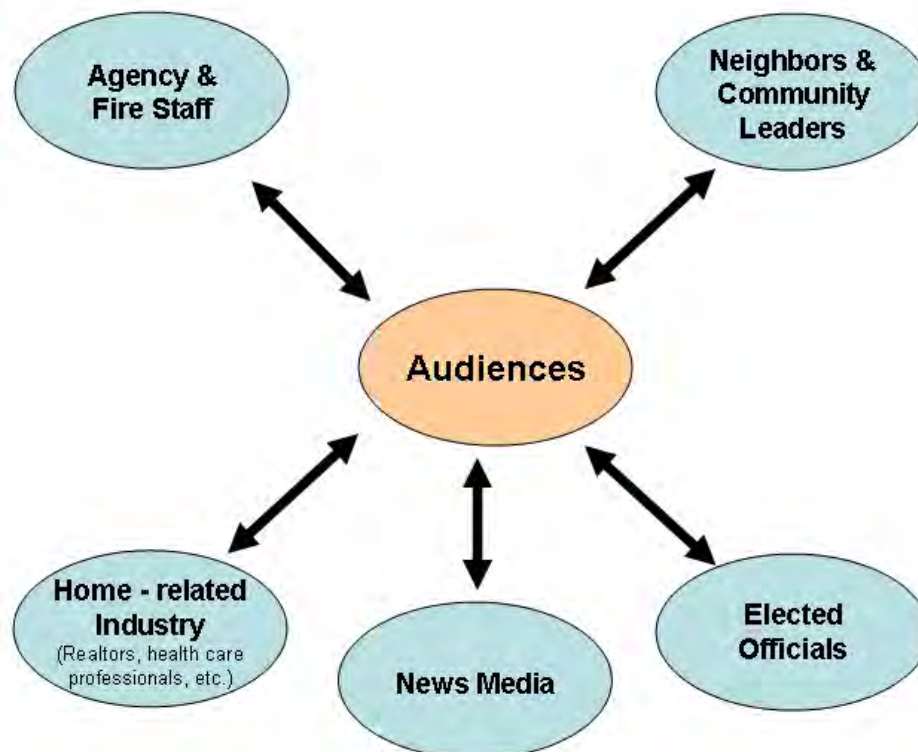
### 3.3 Audiences

Defining the audience(s) is one of the most important elements of communication planning. Every group or organization that might be affected by the fire management activity should be identified to ensure communication is appropriate for that audience.

Consider both internal and external audiences, as well as the people who influence those audiences. To ensure consistent communication with *external* audiences, be sure to communicate with the *internal* audiences as well. Interdisciplinary understanding of the fire management program within the National Park Service will have a ripple effect within and outside of the bureau.

Figure 1 depicts key audiences that may be identified in wildland fire communication planning.

FIGURE 1. Key Audiences for a Fire Communication Plan



Surround key audiences with desired messages, and encourage dialogue with the park and fire management staff and among their own circles.

### 3.4 Messages

The cornerstone of any communication effort is a set of consistent, compelling messages for use in all proactive and reactive communication. Messages should be actionable where appropriate so that, in addition to educating, they will motivate the audiences to act on what they have learned.

*Key messages* are general concepts that can be incorporated into discussions, print materials, and other resources used in communication, education, information, and prevention efforts. Key messages are umbrella statements that require additional supporting points and examples for context.

*Supporting points* provide detail for the key messages and enable individuals to further explain the identified topic.

For example, the National Park Service Fire Communication and Education Program has developed a set of core messages for the bureau to use in communicating the role of wildland fire. These messages are part of the National Park Service *Wildland Fire Communication Toolbox*:

1. The National Park Service Wildland Fire Management Program commits to safety, science and stewardship each and every day.
2. Many healthy ecosystems depend on wildland fire as a natural process.
3. The NPS continuously adapts its fire management strategies based on scientific research to mitigate risks to communities and ecosystems.
4. The National Park Service works with neighbors and other partners to balance the risks and benefits of wildland fire in an ever-changing environment.

The complete messages, along with supporting points, are available online on the [Fire and Aviation Hub \(SharePoint\)](#).

### 3.5 Strategies

Strategies define the general path to reach the identified objectives without providing specific directions. Strategies should tie directly back to objectives. Tactics identify the specifics of exactly how strategies will be implemented.

### 3.6 Tactics

Tactics are the specific activities needed to implement the plan. Each tactic should directly relate to the strategies and support the objectives. The tactics

section should be detailed, and it can be organized to describe different tactics for each audience. Be as creative as possible with tactics, and consider the audiences and how they may be influenced.

### **3.7 Action Plan and/or Timeline**

An Action Plan or Timeline ensures that the implementation of the plan stays on schedule and meets predetermined deadlines.

### **3.8 Evaluation**

Establish a plan for measuring the success of the communication effort. Refer back to the objectives to determine what evaluation tactics will be necessary. The evaluation stage can range from basic to complex, depending on the scope of the project. The findings of the evaluation can improve the selection and implementation of future program strategies and tactics.

### **3.9 Budget**

Budget planning can take place at the beginning of the communication planning process or after determination of what needs to be accomplished. Set priorities in the plan and allow for flexibility should there be funding limitations.

## **4 Crisis Communication**

A *communication crisis* is often defined as an unplanned event that triggers a real, perceived, or possible threat to life, health and safety, the environment, financial status, or the organization's credibility. Crises in fire management can occur, and it is best to be prepared with a communication response plan before an actual event occurs. When a crisis occurs, it may be difficult to develop a communication plan initially. A plan should be developed, however, even if it is after the fact, in order to document communication response. In the unfortunate event of an accident, injury, fatality, or situation that warrants an investigation, refer to NPS policies that address Line of Duty Death (LODD), Serious Accident Investigations, and Law Enforcement Protocol.

### **4.1 Elements of a Crisis**

The following elements are typical of a crisis:

- Crises happen with little or no warning; only in retrospect do little pieces of information start to add up.
- There is little or no information, especially in initial stages.

- During the initial stages, available information is contradictory, incomplete, or will change completely.
- Communication tools will probably not function properly.
- There may be physical damage or personal injury.
- There will be much confusion.

Crisis communication fails for the following reasons:

- They are not employed quickly enough. The first 24 hours are critical, and the first 2 hours are the most critical.
- They inadvertently prolong the crisis by failing to address it head on or by belatedly addressing the real issue, which is often being framed by the media and/or by critics.

## **4.2 Crisis Communication**

In an immediate fire crisis, address the ABCs of communicating the basic crisis message:

- A. Tell the audience that fire managers recognize (or better yet, are the first, in alerting about) the problem.
- B. Tell them the park cares about the impacts on them.
- C. Tell them what park managers are going to do to help mitigate these impacts.

Generally news reports are restricted to tight time slots and sound bites. However, each fire crisis is a window of opportunity for opening in-depth dialogues with audiences about the issue at hand.

### **4.2.1 Two Goals of a Crisis Communication Plan**

1. Control communication: Employ the front door strategy.  
Successful organizations adopt the simple premise that open, accurate, and direct communication with the media is the most effective way to share information with the public, build trust, and prevent the spread of misinformation: “Come in the front door and you will get complete cooperation—that is, we’ll give you all you need to know as quickly as we know it.” Otherwise, if an organization closes the front door to the media, the media will try to get the information through a side window or a back door, and information obtained in that manner may be inaccurate and potentially damaging. An organization that allows this to happen loses credibility with the media and ultimately the public. In a crisis situation, define the issue quickly and accurately. Likewise, release the information (even if it is minimal) quickly and accurately.



Knowledge of the questions frequently asked in a crisis situation may assist in organizing and responding in an expedient manner:

- Who was involved? (*Caution:* If the crisis involved an injury, fatalities, or potential investigation, obtain approval prior to releasing the names of those involved).
  - What happened?
  - When?
  - Where?
  - Why? What was the cause?
  - How could you have allowed this to happen?
  - What are you going to do about it?
  - How much damage is there?
  - Who is to blame? (*Caution:* Recognize this question will be asked, but there may in fact be no responsible party and/or answering the question may be inappropriate if the incident warrants an investigation).
  - Do you accept responsibility? Liability?
  - Has this ever happened before?
  - What do you have to say to those who were injured? Inconvenienced?
  - How does this affect your operations?
  - What's next? (Timeline of events to occur).
  - When will we know more? (Timeline of information releases to follow).
2. Restore order as smoothly and quickly as possible.  
During a crisis, communication can become unruly. The best way to restore order quickly is to remember to *get help and get it early*. Do not hesitate to ask for help—effective communication early on in the crisis will have a critical impact in the long term. Negative communication will preoccupy efforts, whereas positive and sincere efforts will reflect well on the park, region, or the Service.

Therefore, take the following steps:

- Anticipate rather than merely react to crisis.
- Anticipate how the media might play a story so that the park can be ready to immediately respond or to announce information in a timely manner.
- Prepare for the issue to shift quickly—for example, from a safety violation to a history of cover-ups of poor management practices.

#### 4.2.2 Remember What the Media Can Do For You in a Crisis

The media can play a helpful role in efficiently and effectively disseminating information in the following ways:

- Assisting in pre-crisis education.
- Warning audience of situation(s).
- Getting requests or information to the public.
- Reassuring the public.
- Repudiating rumors.
- Helping the response.
- Being a source of information for the staff.
- Generating outside help.

### 5 Media Relations

The news media are valuable partners in sharing fire management news with the public. If the park has a public affairs officer who is available to assist in generating awareness of the fire management program, be sure to coordinate with him or her and work within the park's specific media guidelines and protocol. Communicating with viewers, readers, and listeners through the news media and establishing the park and the park's fire management program as a reliable source of information is an excellent way to educate and generate awareness of the fire management program.

In the age of "24/7" news, the media environment is ever-changing. There is a wealth of information available for enhancing an organization's media relations efforts. The following sections provide a media overview, news writing tips, and information on press kits.

#### 5.1 Media Overview

Working effectively with the media requires knowledge and understanding of media tools, processes, constraints, and limitations.

##### 5.1.1 General Guidelines

These guidelines should be followed when working with the media:

- *Be concise* when contacting media. The nature of the news business leaves reporters and editors on very tight schedules. Explain the event in 30 seconds and offer to e-mail a media advisory.

- *Acknowledge deadlines* and what times a station airs its newscasts or a newspaper goes to print. While specific times vary, it is generally best to contact the media before 3 p.m.
- *Don't become a nuisance*. Once a reporter or editor has been contacted and has received the advisory, there is no need to call again unless there are changes.
- *Provide equal access*. Release the same information at the same time to everyone. Being labeled as a source that “plays favorites” damages credibility. The exceptions to this rule are when reporters call on their own initiative and want to do a story on a particular aspect of fire management, or when there is a story idea that fits a specific media outlet.
- *Encourage and facilitate site visits* by reporters so they can see fire management techniques that are being or have been applied. Be sure to include the appropriate escorts, safety briefing, and direction on personal protective equipment. More information on this topic may be found in the annually revised [\*Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations\*](#).
- *Coordinate responses*. If the fire management program is currently facing any controversies that have caused backlash from media or the community, be sure to coordinate responses with the appropriate park, regional, and national offices prior to releasing any information.

### 5.1.2 Interview Guidelines

These guidelines should be followed when arranging, preparing for, and taking part in an interview.

#### Arranging an Interview

When a station or newspaper contacts the park to arrange an interview, tell the reporter that having as much information as possible to prepare would be helpful. Ask the reporter the following questions:

- What is the name of the person who will likely be conducting the interview?
- Will the interview take place via phone, or in person?
- Is it preferable that the interview takes place in the studio or at the newspaper, or can the interview occur at a site related to fire management activity?
- What date and time will the interview be?
- How long will the interview last?
- What story angle will be explored?
- What kinds of questions are expected?

- *TV/radio only*: Will the interview be live or taped?
- *TV/radio only*: What time will they start taping/go on air?

#### Before the Interview

- Know the reporter, publication or program, interview format, and audience.
- Know the goal for the interview. What should the interview accomplish?
- Know what you want to say; prepare key message points.
- Imagine what questions the reporter will likely ask, and then write down the appropriate answers. Be sure to work in the prepared message points.
- Prepare a range of potential questions that may be asked. Anticipate difficult questions.

#### Interview Tips—General

- Speak in “headlines.” Offer a conclusion first, briefly and directly, and back it with facts or “proof points.”
- Don’t over answer. Short answers are better than long.
- Don’t be confined by the question. Expand to a related point.
- Asked about a problem? Talk about a solution.
- Don’t let false statements or figures offered by a reporter stand uncorrected.
- Don’t repeat a reporter’s negative statements or slurs. Frame the reply as a positive statement.
- Don’t engage in hypothetical situations and “A or B” dilemmas. Only comment on actual situations.
- Speak clearly. Avoid jargon.
- Be engaging, likable.
- Don’t know the answer? Don’t fake it. If appropriate, assure the reporter you will find and provide the needed facts in a timely manner, or offer to assist the reporter in finding another source.
- Don’t interrupt the interviewer’s question; begin the answer when the reporter is finished.
- Keep cool. Don’t be provoked.
- Never lie to a reporter.
- Do not speak “off the record.” Reporters are not obligated to refrain from publishing any information that has been shared, regardless of the nature of the conversation. Don’t share information with a reporter that the park would not be comfortable seeing in print or on the air.
- Do not say “no comment.” Let the reporter know that you are not in the position to respond to certain questions so that “no comment” does not become the sound bite on the evening news. Offer a brief explanation,

such as “The fire is currently under investigation” or “We are not in a position to provide details at this time.”

#### Tips for Telephone Interviews

- Establish an “interview atmosphere” and mind-set.
- Use notes.
- Ask questions in order to gain feedback.
- For radio, speak visually; use words to paint pictures.

#### Tips for Television Interviews

- Sit erect, but not ramrod-straight, slightly forward in the chair.
- Resist the urge to shout into the microphone. Speak and gesture naturally.
- Talk to the interviewer and look at him or her, not the camera.
- Keep a pleasant expression; smile when appropriate.
- Hold an “interview attitude” from the moment the reporter and videographer arrive until they leave.

## **5.2 News Writing**

There are several distinct tools used in news writing; this section addresses news releases, media advisories, and fact sheets.

### **5.2.1 News Releases**

The news release is the tool most commonly used to generate news media interest in policies, programs, and activities. The purpose of a news release is to disseminate information. News releases should be well-written, informative, interesting, and brief. The content should be timely and newsworthy.

As a news release is being prepared, use the five “W’s” and the “H” to organize and present thoughts:

1. *Who* is involved, who said or did something, to whom did something happen?
2. *What* was said or done or will happen?
3. *When* did or will the story/event take place?
4. *Where* did or will it take place?
5. *Why* did or will it happen?
6. *How* did or will it happen?

The order in which these facts appear depends on their importance in the story—the most critical go first. Avoid bureaucratic or technical jargon. Use small words rather than big ones.

The news release should be formatted according to the specifications of the park and should follow the park's distribution and approval policy. Appropriate approval is frequently required before releasing any information to the media.

#### *A Note on Written Style*

When preparing written materials, be sure to consult a style manual to ensure consistency. Several options follow:

[HFC Editorial Style Guide](#). Harpers Ferry Center (HFC) uses this style guide when preparing Unigrid brochures, waysides, exhibits, and other media. It supplements our primary style guide, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. The HFC guide includes terms and phrases specific to National Park System areas and decisions about recurring and commonly asked questions.

[U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual](#). The GPO Style Manual is prepared under the authority of section 1105 of Title 44, U.S.C., which requires the Director to “determine the form and style” of Government printing. The Manual is prepared by the GPO Style Board, composed of proofreading, printing, and Government documents specialists from within GPO, where all major congressional as well as executive agency publications are produced.

[AP Stylebook](#). Perhaps the most universal style manual among news media and communication specialists, the *AP Stylebook* offers guidelines on spelling, usage, grammar, and punctuation.

[The Chicago Manual of Style](#). Similar to the *AP Stylebook*, this manual offers guidelines on spelling, usage, grammar, and punctuation

### **5.2.2 Media Advisories**

The media advisory is used as an invitation to encourage media to cover press conferences, media days, show-me tours, or special events. The media advisory should be kept to one page, and should answer the following questions about the event:

- *What* will happen at the event? Write a brief description of the event.
- *Who* will be present? List speakers, special guests, and any other key participants in the event. Be sure to include correct spellings of names along with appropriate titles.
- *When* it will take place? (date and time)
- *Where* it will take place? (including address, city, state, and any other pertinent details)

- *Why* it is happening? Write a few words explaining the importance of the event. Why should the reporter want to come to it?
- *Story angles* that may interest media. Be sure to include any special photo or interview opportunities, tips, or “news you can use” information.
- *Contacts* for media to call for more information. Be sure to include a cell phone number and e-mail address.

The advisory should be distributed two or three days prior to the event. Follow up by phone the day before the event and/or the morning of the event to encourage attendance.

### 5.2.3 Fact Sheets

A fact sheet is a simple, cost-effective method for sharing information about a specific topic. Often one or two pages and printed on an 8½” x 11” sheet of paper, a fact sheet can lay out the details of an issue or activity. Fact sheets also can be e-mailed as Microsoft Word or PDF files for immediate distribution. When developing fact sheets that may be shared electronically, convert them to PDF or use a Windows product such as Microsoft Word that most people are able to access. Assure that you have gone through the process to make any documents distributed compliant with accessibility laws and policies found in [Section 508](#) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

### 5.3 Press Kit, Press Package, or Information Package

While the name implies a package focused solely on the media, a press kit is simply a packet of information. In fact, a “press kit” can be used as an informational folder for special events, briefings, or dignitary visits. Press kits present recipients with accurate information and key messages provided by the park, regional, or national office.

The contents of the information packet may include park and/or fire management history and accomplishments; profiles of key positions (i.e., burn boss, fire management officer, etc.); fact sheets; recent press releases; brochures; newsletters; website locations for additional information; business card and/or contact information; and photos in either hard copy or digitally on a CD or thumb drive.

#### Tips for a Quick Package

- Presentation is critical. The package need not be fancy, but it does need to be organized and concise. (More information may only serve to overwhelm the reader).
- Use a standard pocket folder to hold all information.

- Identify the press kit in some manner (adhesive sticker, illustrative photo stapled to the cover, etc.).
- Assemble all the information in a logical order. Consider a table of contents for the left and right side pockets which details the information found within the respective pockets.
- Insert a general park or an individual's business card in the slits of the pocket folder (if pre-cut slits exist), or staple the card to the folder pocket.
- Maintain general press kits on hand at the office so information is available to every news outlet and when significant visits occur.

#### **5.4 News Conferences**

News conferences provide an opportunity to share important information with multiple media sources at once. However, use news conferences sparingly and limit them to important "hard news" subjects. The following are other tips to consider:

- The best time to hold a news conference is between 10:00 a.m. and noon. This helps ensure that most reporters meet their deadlines.
- Avoid weekends, Mondays, and Fridays as many media outlets are short-staffed on those days. Midweek days will usually provide better exposure for a message.
- Write a media advisory to announce the date; time, location, and subject of the news conference (see section on Media Advisories). However, do not disclose details about the subject being discussed because the media may use that information to write the story and skip the news conference. If a reporter calls and wants to talk about the topic before the news conference, politely refuse. If the story appears in one media outlet before the news conference, the rest of the media are less likely to attend.

### **6 Tools, Resources, and References**

There are many documents and tools available to assist with fire communication and education, depending on the need. Below is a short listing of documents and other resources. The actual URLs are provided in appendix 1 as web links:

- [\*Agency Administrator's Guide to Critical Incident Management\*](#)
- [\*Communication Plan Template \(SOP Communications Plan\)\*](#)
- [\*Harpers Ferry Center Editorial Style Guide\*](#)
- [\*Incident Response Pocket Guide\*](#)
- [\*Communication and Education - Fire and Aviation Hub \(SharePoint\)\*](#)
- [\*Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations\*](#)
- [\*Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Website\*](#)



- [\*Loss of Human Life Handbook\*](#)
- [\*NPS Guide to Public Affairs\*](#)
- [\*PIO Incident Organizer\*](#)
- [\*Safety for Personnel Visiting Fires \(see Safety and Risk Management Chapter of Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations\)\*](#)

Exhibit 1



## United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

1849 C Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20240

IN REPLY REFER TO:

A7623 (2400)

June 13, 2006

### Memorandum

To: Regional Directors  
Attn: Superintendents

From: Deputy Director, Operations /s/ **Steve Martin**

Subject: Release of Incident Information to the News Media and General Public

#### Purpose

This memorandum provides National Park Service (NPS) employees with guidance and direction regarding the release of incident information to the news media and general public. It specifically addresses which types of information may be released during, and shortly after, the occurrence of an NPS incident. This memorandum will serve as an interim policy until the completion of Director's Order 75-B, Media Relations.

#### Policy

The NPS takes its responsibility to protect the personal privacy of its visitors and employees very seriously. At the same time, the importance of providing appropriate, legal, and adequate information to the news media and general public is critical. After recent consultation with the Solicitor's Office, a legal determination has been made that certain information regarding NPS incidents is releasable under specific circumstances.

The NPS will provide pertinent information to the news media and general public in accordance with applicable laws, policies, and regulations. The NPS recognizes the public's legal rights to obtain information about government operations and activities. These rights are outlined in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 and further influenced by provisions of the Privacy Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552a. Nothing in this memorandum changes existing NPS guidelines for processing FOIA requests or other information protected by the Privacy Act.

There are situations where it would be inappropriate to disclose information in the absence of a formal request. It is important for employees to exercise careful judgment in such instances and to request guidance from their FOIA/Privacy Act officer and/or the Solicitor's Office whenever questions about information release arise.

Exhibit 1

Responsibility

Regional Directors and Superintendents are responsible for ensuring that employees disseminating public information within their areas of responsibility are aware of the laws, policies, and regulations governing information release. When practicable, one person/office should be designated as the point of contact for the purposes of releasing information about NPS incidents.

Affirmative Incident Information Disclosures

Employees with personal knowledge of an incident (e.g., ranger that participates in a rescue effort; employee at the scene of a disaster, etc.) may disclose certain incident information as long as the information is not derived from a document or information contained in an official Privacy Act System of Records (e.g. official report). This information may be passed on to another employee (e.g., public affairs officer or park spokesperson) for release and dissemination to the media and general public. Information released under these circumstances should take place as the incident is occurring or shortly thereafter.

Criminal Incident Considerations

Because of the unique sensitivities surrounding law enforcement investigations and criminal cases, information may not be releasable due to varying factors. Employees should also be aware that when criminal complaints or other documents are filed with a court of law, information within those complaints is normally public record. The media is aware of this and should be directed to the court to obtain the information from those documents.

Employees should ensure that they use caution when describing the circumstances relating to criminal cases. Anyone arrested for a criminal violation is innocent until proven guilty and all statements pertaining to a person's criminal activities should be prefaced with "alleged" unless a judge/jury has issued a guilty verdict on the criminal charge(s). At no time should witness information be given out. Questions about release of information regarding law enforcement investigations should be directed to the park or regional senior law enforcement officer.

Information Disclosures – Emergent Circumstances

Information may be released regarding any person (including juveniles) when the media/public's assistance is necessary to either: 1) locate the person or, 2) warn the public of possible danger (e.g., dangerous criminal). Under these circumstances, information regarding the person's name, age, appearance, clothing worn, location/time last seen, alleged criminal activity, etc., should be disseminated as quickly as possible.

Releasable/Non-releasable Information

After taking these considerations into account, the following types of information may be released. If there are doubts as to the releasability of the information, it should not be disseminated publicly.

*Releasable Information:*

1. Names, ages, and hometowns of the individuals involved in the incident.
2. Relevant details pertaining to the incident.
3. Names of fatality victims whose next of kin have been notified, including juveniles.
4. Description of lost, stolen, or missing property.
5. Criminal charges if applicable.

*Non-Releasable Information:*

1. Names of fatally or seriously injured victims whose next of kin have not been notified.
2. Names of juveniles charged with criminal offenses.

Exhibit 1

3. Names of victims of sexual assaults.
4. Names of people or witnesses who may become victims of crimes or retaliation in the future.
5. Information on incidents where criminal action is still under investigation and information released could hinder or adversely affect the investigation.
6. Investigative information that goes beyond general incident reporting.
7. Explicit details, including graphic photos or images of extreme injuries or brutal fatalities.
8. Home addresses, telephone numbers, and social security numbers.

cc: Associate Regional Directors, Operations  
Chief, Communications and Public Affairs