

# NWCG PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

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This document is intended to direct Public Information Officers and others to information and references for appropriate guidance on the use of social media. Although much of this information is agency-specific, many of the concepts and best practices referenced are broadly applicable across the wide range of incidents that public information officers support.

## LAWS, POLICIES, AND GUIDELINES

### TASKS

Familiarize yourself with current laws, policies, and procedures in place for your own agency and the agencies you are supporting.

Make sure social media use falls within the scope of the Delegation of Authority.

Follow or create incident management team social media standards.

Be aware of agency policy and rules regarding photography on social media.

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### BEST PRACTICES

- Work within the scope of the Delegation of Authority and any agency or unit communication plans.
  - Use the social media platforms already in existence by the unit. Do not establish new channels without express permission from the entities represented under the Delegation of Authority.
  - Incident Specific accounts should not be established without consulting with all agencies involved. If an incident-specific account is established, recommend using the IMT logo or the "Official Fire Information" logo.
- Do not discuss any agency or bureau related information that is not considered public information.
- Assume that any content you post may be considered in the public domain, will be available for a long period of time, and can be published or discussed in the media.
- Understand and follow agency policies regarding deleting posts.
- Provide content that focuses on quality over quantity.
- Don't post internal operational documents or documents that may have privacy act protected information. Some information may

not be shared because of privacy concerns or future litigation.

- The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) states that agencies may not post survey of any kind, including web polls and satisfaction surveys that pose identical, specific questions (including through pop-up windows). These surveys are treated the same as in-person, mail, or telephone surveys, are subject to the public notice and comment requirements of the PRA and must have Office of Management and Budget approval before use.
  - You may post open-ended questions to your audience on social media but may not use structured questions where the audience must choose from a selection of choices, i.e. using surveys tools.

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## STRATEGY

- Social media is one of several tactics for sharing information. Know your local audience and prioritize information tactics based upon the needs of the audience.
- Diversify your reach. Don't rely only on social media for sharing emergency information with the public.
- Designated social media PIOs may post information available on InciWeb and/or agency websites, all additional posts must be approved by the Lead PIO.
- Consult the lead PIO before commenting, answering questions, or engaging with the public on social media.
- Monitor social media posts and respond appropriately and timely.
- PIOs will follow unit comment policy identified on the social media platform. In general, do not engage in vulgar or abusive language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms targeting individuals or groups.
- Create incident communication strategies for social media use based on Delegation of Authority and agency communication plans.
- Don't create any pages, sites, or handles for the incident without first discussing an incident social media strategy with the public affairs officer(s) you are delegated to represent.
- Work with the local public affairs officer to ensure consistent message and plan for release of social media messaging.
- Document incident social media strategy if using social media as a communication tactic.
- Work with the Incident Commander to determine social media use, team platforms, and management strategy.
- Develop and communicate social media Crisis Communication/Incident within an Incident plan ahead of time, working with the Incident Commander and the Agency Administrator or Public Affairs Officer.

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## LINKS

- All links should be to official sources of information or partner agencies.
- Links to media articles are discouraged to avoid the perception of endorsing one media outlet over another and to help maintain the incident website as the primary source for official information.

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## PHOTOS

- Consider safety first when acquiring photos for content. Do not risk your safety or the safety of others to obtain social media content.
- Do not post pictures of convict crews. Children need to have parental consent and release forms.
- Photos posted should be of high quality with professional standards in mind.

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## ACCESSIBILITY

- Provide appropriate access to persons with limited English proficiency.
- All federal agencies must write using plain language in accordance with The Plain Writing Act of 2010. This means all publicly distributed content should be written in a “clear, concise, well-organized” manner. Some best practices for writing in plain language include:
  - Choose words that are common and easy to understand
  - Avoid run-on sentences. Use clear, short sentences and paragraphs.
  - Write in the active voice instead of the passive voice.
  - Use the correct message for the medium.

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## REFERENCES

[DOI Digital Media Policy](#)

[DOI Guidelines](#)

[USDA Social Media Guidelines](#)

[USDA New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities](#)

[Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#)

[Privacy Act](#)

[Paperwork Reduction Act](#)

[The Plain Writing Act of 2010](#)

[Guidelines for Writing in Plain Language](#)

[Checklist for Plain Language on the Web](#)

[PIO Incident Organizer](#)

[USDA Photography Policy Departmental Regulation 1480-001](#)

## ETHICS

### TASKS

Know professional versus personal use of social media.

Understand copyright laws and how to appropriately credit.

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### BEST PRACTICES

- Incorporate subject matter experts and liaison officer if available into your discussions to ensure cultural sensitivities are taken into account.
- Understand the political, social, economic, infrastructure and cultural dynamics that effect communication delivery.
- Social media can sometimes blur the line between professional and personal lives and interactions. Statements intended as personal opinion can be mistaken for official expressions of agency policy or position. Care by all wildland fire personnel, especially supervisors, must be taken to ensure personal use of social media does not create the appearance of official use of social media. This includes ensuring firefighters are not using their government title or position in a manner that would create an appearance that the Government sanctions or endorses one's activities.
- Incident Management Teams are encouraged to have social media guidelines for all incident personnel.
  - Do not engage in vulgar or abusive language, personal attacks of any kind, or offensive terms targeting individuals or groups
  - Do not engage in criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, or other conduct prejudicial to the Government at any time.
  - Do not discuss information that is considered non-public. The discussion of internal, sensitive information is strictly prohibited. Failure to comply may result in fines and/or disciplinary action
  - Do not “scoop” the PIO or the agency by releasing information ahead of them.

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### PROHIBITED USES

- Do not endorse non-Federal products, services, or entities.
  - Do not solicit donations of any kind.
  - Do not engage in activity directed toward the success or failure of political parties, candidates, or groups.
  - Do not advocate for a policy or Congressional bill.
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#### PRIVACY

- Consider intellectual property rights for contractors or partners before publishing information that is worked on collectively.
  - Consider public privacy before publishing photographs, videos, or information identifying private property.
  - Consider potential ramifications and agency guidelines before posting pictures of fireline personnel that aren't wearing full PPE, identifiable structures (ie. visible address), photos of burned structures before property owners have been notified, inmate crews, faces of children, accident or investigation scenes, sensitive natural or cultural resources, or flip charts / whiteboards with internal passwords and contact information.
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#### PHOTOGRAPHY GUIDANCE

- Photographs and videos taken during government work hours are property of the agency you are working for regardless of whether or not you are using your personal property.
  - No photographic work will be undertaken that is not essential for official use or necessary in furthering the official business of the unit.
  - Photographs taken of work or subject matter by employees using private equipment on government time are the property of the unit/agency. This means that during work hours, wildland firefighters can only take photos or videos that are needed for work purposes and those photos or videos are government property, even if wildland firefighters take them on their personal devices.
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#### REFERENCES

[Government Ethics and Use of Social Media](#)

[Hatch Act Guidance on Social Media](#)

[USDA Photography Policy](#)

[NIFC Guidelines for Firefighter Photography, Video, and Social Media Use](#)

[Great Basin Team 5 Social Media and Photo/Video Use](#)

# PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

## TASKS

Monitor content.

Communicate social media best practices with fire personnel.

Evaluate Effectiveness of social media communication by quantifying and interpreting metrics of evaluation (frequency of use).

Post maps with consideration of operations and provide proper context.

Right-size your social media strategy during transitions.

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## BEST PRACTICES

- Establish news alerts for the incident to monitor electronic media traffic. Consider setting alerts for fire name, Incident Commander's name, and other pertinent information. This is a great way to track media interest and collect newspaper articles for required documentation.
- Use map-based sites for situational awareness of incidents nearby.
- Be consistent with hashtags, work with agency cooperator and incident personnel so use and monitoring are consistent.
- Use multiple avenues to communicate social media expectations with fire personnel, including contractors. Examples: morning briefings, 'code of ethics' at check-in, information posted on ICP boards and in IAPs.
- Review platform analytics regularly to know and understand follower base and interactions to best communicate.
- Know the best times of day for high interaction for important messages. Also note the frequency of posts to make based on interactions and feedback.
- Manage post frequency and content based on analytics and audience feedback and engagement.
- Make sure posted maps are legible and understood on their own.
- Consider the differences between maps used on social media vs. trapline (e.g. level of detail)

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## PHOTOGRAPHY

- Consider these elements when taking photos in the field, and when choosing photos to post on social media platforms.

- Storytelling – Is there a feeling of movement within your image, or does it just sit there? Does it leave anything to the imagination, or is it just a statement of what is? If your image doesn't tell a story, there is no reason to give it a second glance. Great photos make you want to look again and again.
- Intent – Could any viewer look at this photo and KNOW what you had in mind?
- Emotional Impact with nature photos – Can this photo be described with words of emotion, like peace, calmness, anger, joy, or sadness? Does your nature photo make an emotional statement?
- Center of interest – When composing your images do you successfully direct your viewer's attention to a specific point? Would the viewer know where your center of interest is?
- Subject/background contrast – Shooting a portrait of someone with black hair against a black background is not a good idea. Does your subject stand out, or is it hidden in the shadows?
- Composition – Do you consistently use the rule of thirds? Is there too much foreground or skyline in your photo? If you are too far away from the subject, move closer. If you can't move closer, edit/crop the photo to remove distracting features.
- Exposure – Does the sun drown out detail in faces? Can you move the subject or the camera to a better angle to eliminate problems created by glare? Can you see details in your shadows or are they just unneeded black spaces?

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## TRANSITIONS

- Ahead of/during transitions, make sure to right-size social media use to prevent undue public expectations.

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## REFERENCES

[Google News Alerts](#) for monitoring content

[InciWeb](#)