



NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP

National Coordination System Committee (NCSC) Memorandum 23-04

April 20, 2023

TO: Anthony Lascano, Chair, National Interagency Aviation Committee
FROM: Sean Peterson, Chair, National Coordination System Committee
SUBJECT: Bi-Annual Update on Aircraft Dispatcher Qualifications

The National Coordination System Committee (NCSC) agreed to provide a bi-annual report to the National Interagency Aviation Committee (NIAC) on the progress regarding the future compliance of policy identified in Forest Service Handbook 5709.16, Chapter 32.22 as addressed in NCSC Memorandum, 2022-05 USFS Aircraft Dispatcher Compliance Timeline. Currently, little progress has been made within the dispatch and coordination system. Many challenges exist impacting the communities' ability to address the lack of qualified aircraft dispatchers nationally. Recommendations made in the NCSC Memorandum 2022-05 have not been aggressively addressed by the agencies to meet the needs of Forest Service policy requirements for implementation in 2024.

The federal land management agencies remain in a crisis to announce and fill dispatch positions in a timely manner. A poll in November 2022 of all ten Geographic Area Coordination Centers and over 250 local interagency dispatch centers showed nearly 400 vacancies nationally including dozens of positions where aircraft dispatching is their primary job. Commonly, positions with aircraft dispatching responsibilities continue to be advertised as seasonal or career seasonal non-permanent positions. NCSC memorandum 22-05 recommended that:

"All tier three local dispatchers will at minimum, have on their organization chart two permanent full time dedicated GS-9 aircraft dispatchers. High complexity dispatch centers with a heavy aviation presence may require a third dedicated GS-9 aircraft dispatcher to stay in full compliance with agency policy. Forests will be budgeted with additional non-discretionary funding to fill these positions as a priority for the agency. When advertising for aircraft dispatcher positions at the local level, additional funding must be budgeted for significant hiring bonuses into locations that are difficult to fill."

To become compliant by, or prior to, January 2024, organizational charts in tier three dispatch centers must be prioritized and expedited to include permanent year-round employment for aircraft dispatchers.

Availability of training courses to achieve the aircraft dispatching qualification continue to be a challenge yet this is an area where progress is being made by the dispatch community. Currently the NWCG 310-1 mandates ten Interagency Aviation Training (IAT) courses to become a fully qualified aircraft dispatcher. These courses make up a mix of online and in-person course work totaling 26.5 hours of curriculum. Historically, the dispatch community has not been prioritized for these courses as they compete with others in the interagency aviation community. To mitigate this shortfall, the NCSC NWCG standards are interagency by design; however, the decision to adopt and utilize them is made independently by the individual member agencies and communicated through their respective directives systems.

has worked closely with the Office of Aviation Services (OAS) to add multiple IAT courses at the Consolidated Dispatch Applications Training (CDAT) this spring to address a back log of students for A-305, A-303 and A-307. Additionally, geographic areas are adding these training sessions to their spring workshops if they have the cadre available.

Unfortunately, there has been no progress in adding fully qualified aircraft dispatchers to the overall availability pool. As of June 2022, there were 589 fully qualified and 230 trainee federal land management personnel with the aircraft dispatcher qualification in IROC. As of February 2023, that number decreased to 584 fully qualified and a slight increase to 246 trainees in IROC. The NCSC believes that there are several reasons behind this.

Most of the individuals working on their Aircraft Dispatcher Position Task Book are the same individuals that are working initial attack consoles at their home dispatch centers. This correlation can be seen in the data pulled from IROC. During the 2022 calendar year, 203 requests were unable to fill nationally for aircraft dispatchers including 23 that were trainee acceptable. In contrast to the Operational side of wildland fire management where engines, hand crews, helitack crews can be “down staffed” due to vacancies, fatigue or supervisor approved additional days off, dispatch does not have this luxury and must be staffed seven days a week during the core of the units fire season. The cumulative fatigue and isolation from family/friends within the dispatch community coupled with 12–14-hour days six to seven days a week for months on end is one of many factors contributing to burnout and mental health issues specifically within the local dispatch centers where hundreds of vacancies exist. Under these conditions it remains to be difficult for individuals to take on a 14-day assignment away from their family and friends if they are granted approval from their supervisors to travel.

Local dispatch centers simply cannot afford to allow trainees on a landscape scale to take assignments away from their home units due to their own staffing needs at home. These same local unit red card committees are also reluctant to sign off position task books without a quality “off unit assignment”. While this has been a legacy standard for red card committees at home units for decades, for all position qualification trainee assignments (not just dispatch), NCSC believes that this catch-22 circumstance the dispatch community finds itself in is beyond our control. Direction to Regional Foresters and local Fire Managers must come from the very top of Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management to expedite the red card committee process where quality assignments at home should count equally as an off-unit assignment.

Generally, the dispatch and coordination community has only been able to make limited progress to become compliant in the request that there will be a fully qualified aircraft dispatcher in place at a local center while dispatching Forest Service agency and contracted aircraft beginning on January 1, 2024. The next bi-annual report from NCSC will be sent in October of 2023 to NIAC.

Respectfully,

SEAN

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Sean Peterson, Chair NCSC

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