



USDA Forest Service
Washington Office, Fire and Aviation Management (WO FAM) Public Affairs
Firefighter Photography, Videography, and Social Media Guidance

As technology evolves, increasing numbers of USDA Forest Service wildland firefighters are bringing their personal mobile phones, cameras, computers and other electronic devices to work and using them to send and receive personal calls and text messages, to take photographs and videos of work-related activities and post them to personal social media accounts, and to monitor their personal social media accounts.

Forest Service policy permits these activities outside of work hours or otherwise not on government time when conducted in compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies. However, engaging in these activities in the complex, hazardous, and dynamic wildland fire environment creates significant risks for wildland firefighters and is therefore strongly discouraged.

There are many legitimate work-related reasons for wildland firefighters to shoot photos and videos on the job, including providing images to duty officers, agency administrators, and incident management team members for size up and decision support; documenting extreme fire behavior to further research; assisting with training development; improving performance and techniques; and documenting accidents or near misses. However, the lives of wildland firefighters depend on maintaining situational awareness at all times. Wildland firefighters who are even momentarily distracted by using their personal mobile phones, cameras, computers, and other electronic devices even during lunch or other breaks, risk missing important verbal information, such as radio transmissions, or environmental cues, such as subtle changes in wind direction and speed, that could be critical to their safety.

Forest Service wildland firefighters who choose to accept the safety risks associated with taking photos and videos of work-related activities and posting them on their personal social media accounts must ensure that they comply with all applicable agency and USDA regulations. Violations may result in disciplinary action. Applicable regulations include, but are not limited to:

- [USDA Photography Policy, Departmental Regulation 1480-001](#) states that “No photographic work will be undertaken that is not essential for official use or necessary in furthering the official business of the USDA,” and “photographs taken of USDA work or subject matter by employees using private equipment on government time...are the property of USDA.” 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.

- [USDA New Media Roles, Responsibilities, and Authorities, Departmental Regulation 1495-001](#) stipulates that “Personal or private users of new media websites or accounts should not claim to officially represent the Department or its policies, or use the Department or other U.S. government seals or logos. Personal or private activities may not violate federal ethics rules.” Additional information regarding Federal ethics rules is available in a [U.S. Office of Government Ethics Legal Advisory regarding “The Standards of Conduct as Applied to Personal Social Media Use.”](#)
- [USDA Regulation on Employee Responsibilities and Conduct, Departmental Regulation 4070-735-001](#) stipulates that “employees are prohibited from engaging in criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, or other conduct prejudicial to the Government at any time.” This applies to all photos, videos, and messages that Forest Service wildland firefighters post on their personal social media accounts, whether they are work-related or not.

Photographs, videos, and other information taken by firefighters could cause complications in the event that the Forest Service becomes involved in any litigation regarding a particular fire. Any information could be considered evidence in the lawsuits, and other litigants may have a right to seek that information from a personal device. Additionally, sharing information from the scene of a fatality or seriously injury, including condolences, is strongly discouraged in order to allow time for compassionate notification of family members.

Forest Service wildland firefighters who shoot photos and videos of work related activities and post them on their personal social media accounts must be mindful that images and messages reflect not only on their own professionalism, but also on the professionalism of their unit, the agency, and the interagency wildland fire community. We are all responsible to stand up for each other and ensure we are fostering a work environment characterized by mutual trust and respect.

The Forest Service has enjoyed a reputation as the world leader in wildland firefighting for more than 100 years. It is the responsibility of all agency wildland firefighters to continue that legacy by ensuring that their conduct is appropriate both on the fireline and online.