

## RELATED TERMS

- Incident Command System
- Common Terms
- Equipment Markings



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## PRIMARY DISCIPLINES

- Emergency Management
- Fire
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# BEST PRACTICE

## Mutual Aid Agreements: Response Protocols

### PURPOSE

This Best Practice suggests that agreements require adoption of common mutual aid response protocols.

### SUMMARY

The use of common response protocols can significantly improve interoperability and response time amongst mutual aid partners. Mutual aid agreements should set forth guidelines for response protocols such as adoption of the Incident Command System and the use of common terms and equipment markings.

### DESCRIPTION

#### *Incident Command System*

In many past events and exercises, the failure of some or all mutual aid partners to adhere to common protocols has harmed response efforts. During the response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Pentagon, some mutual aid partners did not respect the [Incident Command System \(ICS\)](#) and maintained a degree of independence. This attitude undermined what was an otherwise disciplined and orderly response. The use of common response protocols during a large-scale disaster will help ensure a seamless response effort and avoid disputes over command.

It is strongly recommended that mutual aid agreements mandate adoption of the ICS and the principles of Unified Command for all partners. The ICS has been adopted by countless response organizations as the standard for multi-jurisdictional emergency operations.

Mutual aid agreements should stipulate that the requesting agency or jurisdiction maintains overall command over all assisting units. The agreement should also note that individual units remain under the command of their respective officers. The [Mutual Aid Box Alarm System Agreement](#) stipulates that units remain under the employment of the assisting party but are under the direction of the Incident Commander (IC). See the [Arlington County September 11 After-Action Report](#) for additional information on incident command and mutual aid.

[California's Master Mutual Aid Agreement](#) mandates the adoption of the ICS through the use of the Standard Emergency Management System, or SEMS. SEMS was created following investigations into a series of disastrous fires in Northern California. These investigations determined that mutual aid agencies were using different command organization methods, which significantly hampered response efforts.

## **Common Terminology**

Common terms should be used during multi-jurisdictional response efforts. These terms should be defined in the mutual aid agreement or in supporting appendices. These terms should describe capabilities, personnel, and equipment in common language that can be universally understood. This list should incorporate:

During the response to September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the New York Fire Department (FDNY) had difficulty integrating mutual aid units into the response effort because these units used different terminology to describe capabilities.

- Common terms from the ICS, National Fire Protection Association, and other organizations.
- Terms from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) [National Mutual Aid & Resource Management Initiative Glossary](#). This glossary from the National Mutual Aid Initiative (NMAI) will serve as the basis for future resource typing efforts. Jurisdictions should make an effort to incorporate the common terms and definitions into mutual aid planning.

It is particularly important to use common definitions for specialized teams such as hazardous materials (HazMat), technical rescue, and others.

## **Equipment Markings**

Many different response assets will be present at the scene of a multi-jurisdictional response effort. Equipment is often moved and not returned to its original location, which can lead to confusion over ownership and loss of resources.

During the response to September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon, mutual aid units responding to scene shared equipment in accordance with standard operating procedures. The equipment was often not adequately marked, leading to disputes over ownership as well as lost equipment, according to the [After Action Report](#).

Adequate, unique equipment markings can ensure that ownership is clear and beyond dispute. Markings should clearly display:

- Jurisdiction
- Organization
- Unit of origin
- Common ICS and/or FEMA NMAI apparatus name

The scheme must be clear and easily recognized by all mutual aid partners. For personal gear, nametags or similar marking devices should be standard. The mutual aid agreement should set forth standards for equipment markings.

The [Model Fire Mutual Aid Agreement](#) developed by Oregon includes the Regional Apparatus Numbering System intended to combat the duplication of apparatus numbers and subsequent confusion over ownership. The System uses three identifiers:

1. The agency name,
2. The common language ICS apparatus designation, and
3. The number of the station where the apparatus is housed.

For more information on equipment markings, see [Oregon's Fire Mutual Aid Agreement](#) or [Arizona's Fire Mutual Aid Resource Designation System](#).

## **Communication Protocols**

Pre-arranged communication frequencies and procedures can greatly facilitate the integration and coordination of multiple disciplines during incident response. Plain English is strongly recommended for inter-agency communication in mutual aid incidents. Common communication protocols are particularly important when response involves the integration of mutual aid resources that may not have interoperable systems.

Mutual aid partners should consider backup forms of communication to ensure they can contact each other during an emergency. This issue can be dealt with in supporting agreements, appendices, or memoranda of understanding.

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