

PUBLIC AFFAIRS/INFORMATION SECTION

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the Rainbow Incident Information Office, outlined in the Delegation of Authority, are typical Incident Information tasks. Some of the objectives of the Information Office include:

- Provide for internal and external information exchange through a Communications Plan.
- Manage media contacts within the framework of established agency policy.
- Ensure agency cooperators, local officials, and the public are kept informed as to the progress of the event.

OPERATIONS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Communication Plan - A meeting, prior to the National Incident Management Team's relocation to West Virginia, was held with the Public Affairs Office for the Monongahela National Forest. Agreement was reached concerning information assignments and responsibilities. The Communication Plan was drafted and sent to the local Forest Public Affairs Officer for review and approval. The Incident Commander also approved the Communication Plan.

The staffing of the Rainbow Incident Information Team included two Type II Information Officers, one from the Savannah River Site (South Carolina) and the other from the Washington Office. District personnel helped to answer questions about the local area and in particular questions pertaining to the environmental aspects of the Cranberry site. The local Forest Public Affairs Officer was very helpful and had many contacts in the local community and with state and federal elected officials. She provided advice and insight regarding community relations as well as suggestions on improving internal and external communications.

The Information Office was set-up at the Inn at Snowshoe. The Inn also housed the other sections of the NIMT and the Incident Command Post.

- Internal Communications – The Information Office provided a Rainbow Daily Briefing to the Washington Office, the Monongahela National Forest, and the R-9 Regional Office. Information in the briefing concerned law and resource operations. Briefing information included daily vehicle counts, provided by law enforcement, and assessments of resource conditions, provided by permit administrators. The daily briefing, distributed from June 14 through July 6, was intended to be of limited distribution and was approved by the Incident Commander before forwarding. The Monongahela National Forest sent out a number of updates to its own employees while the Information Office provided the forest with a Rainbow question and answer sheet for forest employees. Information Office personnel attended shift briefings to update law enforcement personnel on expected media visiting the gathering and to remind the officers to be careful of any offhand remarks that could be misconstrued by onlookers. Daily information also was sent to the Washington Office Media Desk.
- External Communications – The forest website was used to share info about the Rainbow Family gathering to a wide audience. West Virginia’s Congressional Delegation was included in the Daily Briefing mailings. The District Rangers in Richwood and Marlinton covered the trap lines that included the communities of Richwood, Webster Springs, Marlinton and Hillsboro. Three Unified Command meetings were organized and attended. One meeting was June 14, one June 23, and the last one on June 30. Agencies attending the meetings included: West Virginia State Police, West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Marshals Service, Elkins Police Department, and Pocahontas County Commissioners, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services, Pocahontas County Health Department, and Pocahontas County Memorial Hospital. A meeting of community and business leaders was held June 17 in Elkins. Some of the organizations represented included: Kroger, Davis Memorial Hospital, Chamber of Commerce, and several local banks. The purpose of all the meetings was to capture the concerns of local organizations and communities and to determine ways to share and use resources more efficiently.

The Forest Service conservation message also was shared through the Gauley District Biologist’s talk to the children at the gathering in Kiddie Village. A

Forest Service bulletin board was set-up at the Rainbow Family’s Welcome Center. Information such as protecting your campsite from bears was listed, in addition to information concerning health (personal hygiene) and environmental protection.

Four press releases were developed and distributed. One concerned the signing of the noncommercial group use permit; another alerted readers to the recreation opportunities on the Monongahela despite the presence of the Rainbow gathering; the third was an update of the gathering event; and the final was the conservation education efforts of the Gauley District Wildlife Biologist in Kiddie Village. The Forest Supervisor reviewed each release to ensure accuracy and inclusion of forest messages in the release.

Interviews with newspapers, radio, and television stations were coordinated through the Lead Information Officer. Information concerning these interviews is shown in the table below.

| MEDIA CONTACTS | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Television | Print |
| WBOY NBC Clarksburg | Charleston Gazette, Charleston |
| WCHS/FOX Charleston | The Intermountain, Elkins |
| WOAY Beckley | The Exposition-Telegram, Clarksburg |
| WDTV Bridgeport | Roanoke Times, Roanoke, VA. |
| Videographer W.VA. PBS Morgantown | AP, Morgantown |
| Radio | Pocahontas County Times, Marlinton |
| WAJR Morgantown | Pittsburgh Post Gazette, Pittsburgh, PA. |
| WVMR Dunmore | Cleveland Free Times, Cleveland, OH. |
| West Virginia Public Radio Morgantown | |

VIP Visits – There were several visitors attending the gathering. Below is a table showing tours completed for the gathering.

| TOURS CONDUCTED |
|---|
| John Twist, Forest Service liaison to USDA Under Secretary of Agriculture |
| David Ferrell, WO Deputy Director of Law Enforcement |
| John Reedy, Special Assistant to Mark Rey, Under Secretary of Agriculture |
| Ann Melle, WO Director of Law Enforcement |

Managing the Media - Effective communications between the Incident Information Section and media were extremely difficult in the early stages of the Incident. The communications problem was exacerbated by the lack of cell phone coverage in the area. Additionally the physical distance between Glady Fork and the ICP Headquarters made it very difficult for one Information Officer to cover law enforcement actions in the vicinity of Glady Fork, yet satisfactorily field media inquiries at the ICP. Although all calls from media outlets to the Team were returned, the contact often was too late to impact the story. Consequently, the media began to turn to other sources to gather their information.

Two Information officers and the designation of an agreed upon gathering site improved the opportunity to effectively provide and coordinate the Team's messages for the media. With one Information Officer stationed at the Cranberry Mountain Nature Center, located adjacent to the Rainbow gathering, media could easily contact us. The media began to look to the Team as one of their primary sources of information. With the permit issue settled, media interest began to be directed to the Rainbow Family.

Media interest was highest during the following events: the closure of Glady Fork (June 14); the signing of the permit (June 19) for the Cranberry Site; the court cases (June 28) related to the violation of the occupancy/use rule; the July 4 Rainbow Family gathering; the court cases heard on July 5, and the rehabilitation effort (post July 4) associated with the Cranberry site.

Some of the most often asked questions from the media were:

Why is a noncommercial group use permit required and what does it entail?

The Cranberry site also appears to be environmentally sensitive. Why was the Cranberry area offered as an alternative?

What are some of the impacts local communities can expect?

Can you give a rundown of the court cases and their disposition?

Local Officials, Agency Cooperators, and Public – Ensuring that local officials, agency cooperators, and various publics were kept informed about the progress of the event was accomplished by different organizations. The NIMT organized and conducted three

Unified Command meetings (held at West Virginia DOT and Shavers Fork Fire Department [2]) where issues and concerns were discussed and recorded. One community meeting in Elkins (City Hall) also was held to allow community and business leaders to express their concerns. Forest personnel worked to inform local government officials, forest users, state and federal delegations about the status of the gathering and potential problems for local government. State and Federal legislative delegations were sent daily Rainbow briefings. Law enforcement coordinated and directly cooperated with the West Virginia State Police and the Pocahontas County Sheriff's Department. The predominant question from many government officials was how they would pay for some of the services provided for the Rainbow Family gathering, e.g., trash disposal, unpaid hospital bills. Recommendations were offered as to how to mitigate some of the gatherings' impacts, e.g., Cooperative Law Enforcement agreements.

The goals of the Communications Plan were met.

Recommendations/Observations

1. Add an additional IOF (at least at the IOF2 level) to the Team right up front. The level of media interest will be high, especially if they are aware of the conflict occurring in past years. At the end of two weeks the additional IOF position could be re-evaluated to determine if it is still needed. Ideally the two person IO Team should consist of an experienced member and someone who will take the lead position the following year. In a situation where one side is feeding the media information about what is happening "on the ground", it is imperative we also have someone in the same location to counter any ludicrous claims. The lack of cell phone connections really hamstrung us.
2. New folks on the team need to be told what to bring, i.e., vehicle, equipment, clothing. Some incidents will rent equipment (e.g., computer, printers); some will not. **The IOF person will need to bring a laptop, a compatible printer, and direct access to an e-mail account.**
3. Ensure information distributed within the Team is available to all members.
4. When there is only one daily local newspaper and the reporter assigned to cover the Rainbow gathering refuses to even consider the Team's messages, it is difficult to get your positive side out to the public.

5. If possible, prepare more detailed information to give to the Rainbow Family as to why some areas are environmentally sensitive and should not be an event site. This assumes the Rainbows are willing to sit down and commit to a particular area ahead of time. If not, the time to do this will never be available if the same permit scenario is played out again next year.