



Interagency Aviation Information Bulletin



No. IA IB 22-04

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Subject: Clarification of NWCG Fire Traffic Area Diagram and FAA Temporary Flight Restrictions

Area of Concern: Potential Airspace Challenges Resulting From Common Misunderstandings

Distribution: All Fire and Aviation Activities

Discussion: Deviations from standards can occur in academic or operational settings due to delivery method, the use of unapproved course materials, or conflicting information. Clarifications from agency program managers should be sought whenever there is conflicting information or confusion over standards. Uncertainty of our standards can degrade operations and can lead to the potential for mid-air collisions.

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) and the Interagency Aerial Supervision Subcommittee (IASS) under the direction of the National Interagency Aviation Committee (NIAC) has provided the following [Fire Traffic Area Diagram, PMS 505d](#), for clarification. Aviation personnel should review this material during daily or incident briefings, at required refresher trainings, or during discussions concerning FTA operations. Facilities should post the diagram and this accompanying document in their facilities in an area where employees and contractors can review. Following are common questions and the answers for discussion.

1. What is the difference between Fire Traffic Area (FTA) and a Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR)?

FTA is an interagency airspace management tool containing an established communication protocol. The FTA is a section of airspace with a five nautical mile (NM) radius from the center point of an incident during fire suppression operations.

Responding resources shall arrive on scene using the following procedures based on resource type.

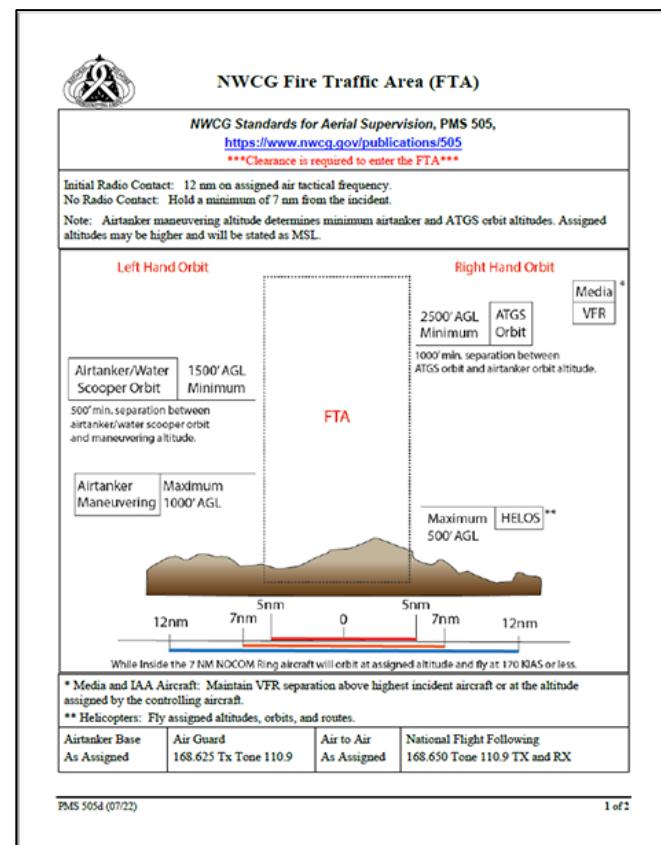
2. ATGS Orbit Altitude: 2,500 Above Ground Level (AGL), expressed using MSL, Right Hand Orbit.

3. Airtanker and Water Scooper Orbit Altitude: 1,500 feet AGL, expressed using MSL, Left Hand Orbit.

4. Airtanker Maneuvering Altitude: Ceiling of 1,000 feet AGL, expressed in MSL, Left Hand Orbit.

5. Helicopter Orbit Altitude: Ceiling of 500 feet AGL, expressed in MSL, Assigned Left- or Right-Hand Orbit.

6. The FTA provides a standardized communication protocol with spatial reference points to provide



incident air traffic separation in proximity to the incident and while over the incident. FTA protocols standardize communications, clearances, and compliance. The FTA must be used by all tactical aircraft. Refer to the [NWCG Standards for Interagency Airspace Coordination, PMS 520](#), and [NWCG Standards for Aerial Supervision, PMS 505](#).

TFRs are controlled by the FAA. TFRs are an area of airspace (defined both laterally and vertically) that has been temporarily or partially closed to non-participatory aircraft for a specified period. TFRs may be requested in response to the aviation safety need for separation of aircraft for disaster or incident activities. All aircraft must receive a clearance from the controlling agency requesting the TFR or its authorized representative prior to entering the TFR utilizing the FTA communications protocols. TFRs are requested through dispatch centers following established ordering procedures. The FAA will issue the TFR and post a Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM). The commonly issued TFR for wildfire is 14 CFR, Part 91,137 (a) 2, which is explicit as to what operations are prohibited, restricted, or allowed. Refer to the NWCG Standards for Interagency Airspace Coordination, Chapter 6, for information on ordering procedures, coordination protocol, and exceptions.

2. Does an FTA exist inside a TFR?

No, Multiple “Areas of Operation” (AO) can occur within the TFR at the same time with different block altitudes for aircraft. FTA communication protocols will be utilized to enter the TFR and assigned AO. An AO resembles a fire traffic area but is not the same. Aerial Supervisors must develop holding points, initial points, flight routes, virtual fences, and check points as appropriate to maintain adequate separation of aircraft as complexity increases. Incident Air Operations Maps must be available and should be briefed to crews prior to engaging complex incidents.

3. What are the dimensions and procedures for entering an FTA?

Initial Communication Ring (ICOM) – A ring 12 NM from the center point of the incident. At or prior to 12 NM, inbound aircraft contact the ATGS or appropriate aerial resource for permission to proceed to the incident. No Communication Ring (NOCOM) – A ring 7 NM from the center point of the incident that should not be crossed by inbound aircraft without first receiving clearance from the appropriate on-scene incident aircraft. While within the NOCOM ring aircraft will operate at established/assigned altitudes and remain at 170 Knots Indicated Airspeed (KIAS) or less.

4. Do Fire Traffic Area (FTA) communication protocols apply to an Initial Point (IP)?

When an IP is in place then responding resources will use the same communication protocols as an FTA uses. ICOM (12 NM) and NOCOM (7 NM).

5. What do you do if you get to the 7-mile NOCOM ring, and you are a resource that has not been “cleared into the FTA”?

If clearance has not been granted prior to the NOCOM ring, the responding aircraft will hold a minimum of 7 NM from the incident. Where to hold will be dictated by unique factors associated with each individual environment. Smoke, terrain, wind, and the route of other aircraft between the incident and airbase(s) may dictate which quadrant (NE, SE, SW, NW). For airtankers, when a clearance has not been granted and they are not the first on scene or initial attack rated, a best practice is to establish a left-hand racetrack orbit within a quadrant until clearance is received.

6. When an airtanker is exiting the FTA, and no departure altitude was briefed, what altitude should be flown and for how long?

Aircraft departing incident airspace must follow assigned departure route and altitude. Aerial supervisors must deconflict routes for departing aircraft within the airspace. When aerial supervision is not on scene, pilots must practice see and avoid. Aircraft will maneuver at speeds below 150 KIAS that best deliver the assigned coverage level on the specified drop area. Departure altitude will remain at or below the airtanker maneuvering altitude. Aircraft will not exceed 150 KIAS until at least 7 NM from the drop/work location.

7. What speeds do you fly in the FTA and surrounding areas?

While within the NOCOM ring (7 NM from the center point of an incident) aircraft will operate at established/assigned altitudes and remain at 170 KIAS or less.

8. What speeds do you fly in the TFR?

There is no speed limit associated with a TFR. Multiple “Areas of Operation” (AO) can occur within the TFR at the same time with different block altitudes for aircraft. FTA communication protocols will be utilized to enter the TFR and assigned AO. When within 7 NM of an assigned AO aircraft will operate at established/assigned altitudes and will remain 170 KIAS or less.

/s/ John Mills

John Mills
Acting Chief, Aviation Safety, Program
Evaluation, and Quality Management
DOI, Office of Aviation Services

/s/ Lori Clark

Lori Clark
Branch Chief - Aviation Safety Management
Systems
USDA, Forest Service