



October 9, 2008

To: National Predictive Services Group
From: National GACC Website Committee
Topic/Issue: 2008 GACC Website Review and Evaluation

For the past ten years or more, the Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC) website has become the focal point for providing accurate and timely information (primarily Intelligence, Logistics, and Predictive Services) to the wildland fire community and to a certain degree, the general public. With the implementation of a standard GACC website in mid-2005, the sites have received a number of accolades, but have also received their fair share of criticism. In order for the GACC sites, as a whole, to maintain a standardized look, it is apparent that a review of the current sites be conducted. Therefore, at the direction of the National Predictive Services Group (NPSG), the National GACC Website Committee (NGWC) was tasked with reviewing and evaluating all of the GACC websites to see if they are meeting the initial standards established and to provide recommendations which would enhance the use of each site for the forthcoming years.

The following is the result of the GACC reviews and evaluations conducted April through September, 2008.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

When the NGWC was given direction to review and evaluate all GACC websites, there was no established protocol or direction for the committee to follow. Without any specific direction, the Committee stumbled initially trying to determine what type of evaluation was needed. After consultation and discussion, the Committee came up with the idea to go back and evaluate each site strictly based on the initial implementation standards. The initial NGWC Implementation Guide can be found on the NGWC website at: <http://gacc.nifc.gov/activities/ngwc/ngwc.htm> .

The evaluators for the GACC website reviews are represented by personnel from five of the GACCs. There were three from Predictive Services Fire Weather program, two from the Intelligence Section, and one from the Logistics Section.

With the exception of the NRCC review, each committee member was given a specific portion of a website and directed to evaluate the section on based on the standards from the initial implementation guide. The NRCC site, which was the first site to be evaluated, was reviewed via a committee conference call prior to the final method established. A copy of the evaluators form is located in **Appendix 1**.

There were six general areas in which the Committee had to review:

- (1) Overall site display
 - left & top justified, proper titles, style sheets, meta tags, clickable top banner, left-side menubar, welcome page content area, About Us page, Site Disclaimer page, and Contact Us page
- (2) Predictive Services
 - basic description, follow general template, utilize the headers approved by the PS community and established in the Implementation Guide
- (3) Logistics
 - follow the general template outline, contain information or links to Area or National websites specific to the page
- (4) Administration and Management
 - follow the general template outline, contain information or links to Area or National websites specific to the page
- (5) Related Links
 - links to websites within the Geo Area, follow the general template outline
- (6) Accessibility (Section 508 Compliance)
 - provide tags for non-text elements, convey color graphics, utilization of server-side images, client-side images and proper tags, use of plug-ins such as Adobe Reader, and proper completion of forms.

No evaluation was conducted pertaining to specific GACC or National products. However, we did look at the location on the site as to where the product should reside.

GACC WEBSITE FINDINGS

1. General Findings

In general, all of the GACC websites are utilizing the basic template established by the NGWC in 2005. This is truly an accomplishment, especially if one goes back and looks at each of the sites just over three years ago. They all display similar graphics across the top banner and have a similar menubar down the left-side. However, we did find that we still have a ways to go in making sure we have a standardized product across the Coordination Center system.

One of the initial standards that led to the development of the initial template in 2005 was the need for firefighters to be able to find the same or similar product in the same location from one GACC site to another. In most cases this can be

accomplished, although sometimes the user has to spend extra time locating the product or link. This can be for different reasons, including the site manager didn't know there was a specific standard established or the manager didn't feel the location initially established was the proper location.

All sites, with the exception of one, were properly justified to the left and all provided some kind of welcome statement to the site. We found that all sites had an About Us page, although several didn't provide much information describing the GACC, the Area, or the Coordinating Group. On a few sites, we found page titles were not properly displayed and META tags were not inserted in the source code. All sites use an external style sheet for displaying fonts, images, and other components in a consistent manner. We found all sites had an adequate Site Disclaimer and Contact Us page.

All sites utilized a left-side menubar with main headers, although some of the main headers had been changed or were missing. We did find there were some significant differences in the sub-headers on the menubar. A number of sites had added new sub-headers, other had changed the title of the sub-header, or yet others had removed the sub-header all together. A couple of sites sub-headers were linked to an agency page instead of a template page with additional links including a link to an agency page. We found a handful of sub-headers with a broken link.

Throughout the secondary pages (i.e. aviation page, weather page, etc), we found a number of broken links. This was especially true for pages that fell under the Logistics / Dispatch and Administration pages. Obviously, we found some sites had this problem more than others, but it was an indication of the lack of attention to the site. We must note, however, that quite often outside links will change and the manager will know nothing about the change.

In the Predictive Services section, there were several sites that did not use the header page to describe Predictive Services. The Intelligence and Weather pages met most of the standard established, although some sites did not have a specific header, removed headers, and renamed headers. We found a number of product links under different headers.

The biggest finding for pages listed under Logistics / Dispatch and Administrative was broken links and incompatibility of links. There weren't many sites in which we did not find broken links. We found two sites that were linked to agency pages in lieu of creating their own with a link to the agency site.

Finally, we found several issues related to Site Accessibility. Several sites did not contain 'alt tags' for graphics displayed on the site. This will keep those handicapped individuals from being able to tell what a graphic is or means. More than any one issue, we found that all sites create a number of files which require the use of Adobe Reader, but did not provide a link to download the Reader.

2. Specific GACC Website Findings

Each GACC website is currently following the initial basic template established by the NGWC in 2005, although a few modifications have been made here or there. There is no doubt that different GACCs manage their sites in different ways. Some are managed with heavy influence by their GACC Coordinating Group, while others are managed by one individual.

The committee considered the site passed if 60% of the standards were met.

AKCC - Alaska Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (22 of 28 standards – 78%)**

This site has a nice, soft appeal upon initial entry onto the site and generally follows the format established in the initial IG. Some of the pages are directed to the AFS site, which presents no problem except the left-side menubar changes. There are some missing links on the left-side menubar (i.e. Related Links, Software). For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.1.

EACC - Eastern Area Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (23 of 28 standards – 82%)**

This site generally follows the standards established. A few minor discrepancies were found including different ways for displaying page titles, left-side banner is not clickable, a broken link or two, disclaimer information, etc. Map on the Related Links page is a plus. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.2.

EGBC - East Great Basin Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (20 of 28 standards – 71%)**

The EGBC site has really good qualities, but looks like development went only so far, then moved on to something else. This is noticeable by a number of broken and outdated links throughout the site. One reviewer wrote “site has a few broken links, a little dated, welcome page a little busy...” while another wrote “nice layout on sections reviewed, easy to find specific topics, good font size...” For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.3.

NRCC - Northern Rockies Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (27 of 28 standards – 95%)**

No glaring omissions, significant deviations, or additions to the site were noticed. This is a well-organized and maintained site for anyone seeking specific information through the NRCC website. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.4.

NWCC - Northwest Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (24 of 28 standards – 85%)**

Overall, this site looks pretty nice with most pages clean and free of clutter, and easy to navigate. Excellent use of color and graphics, and use of Google maps

to display fire locations. Font size on left-side menubar seems to affect some reviews. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.5.

ONCC - Northern California Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (19 of 28 standards – 67%)**

This site starts off good with a nice welcome page, but falls short when clicking on some of the links, especially some of main pages on the left-side menubar. It seems the developer thought it was better to link directly to some outside sites versus creating a template page and placing a link from the page (i.e. Aviation, Financial Management, Safety, Software App., and Training). In addition, there is no Equipment or Overhead page on the site. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.6.

OSCC - Southern California Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (17 of 28 standards – 60%)**

The OSCC site generally follows the template. In lieu of creating a page based on the template, the GACC chose to link to other pages (i.e. an agency page). On About Us page, it seems all of the groups listed work for Predictive Services. Not sure this is the case. South Zone Training link is broken. Website contains many of the items for crews, overhead, etc, but they are all on the Intelligence page vice respective Logistics page. Left-side menubar needs equipment and overhead buttons and links to template pages in order to bring the site up to standards. Some broken links were found. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.7.

RMCC - Rocky Mountain Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (18 of 28 standards – 64%)**

The RMCC is a very nice looking site and had it been up and running prior to the implementation of the current GACC template would probably have been high suggested as the GACC template. However, since that is not the case the site misses on a number of basic standards established in the initial template outline. First off, the page is not left justified, no description keywords in the source code, banner links above vice below graphic, uses “Publications” instead of “Policy and Reports,” no FirstGOV link, missing “Situation” and “Resources” headers on Intelligence page, etc. Several headers display should be incorporated into the next GACC template update. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.8.

SACC - Southern Area Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (23 of 28 standards – 82%)**

Overall, this site is well maintained with many of the pages clean and well organized. There were a few items that did falter including the need for alt tags (i.e. describes graphic) to each graphic or image located on the site, broken links, linking to a larger map of the Area on the Welcome page, missing a Software Applications page, description of Predictive Services page, etc. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.9.

SWCC - Southwest Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (26 of 28 standards – 92%)**

This site is well maintained and follows guidelines pretty well. Only a few minor tweaks are needed to the site, primarily some broken links, missing <alt tags> describing graphics, etc. The use of different colored buttons (orange/green) to indicate if the link is a product maintained by SWCC is very useful. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.10.

WGBC - Western Great Basin Coordination Center

Did the site meet the established standards? **PASS (22 of 28 standards – 78%)**

In general, this site meets a majority of the template standards established, however, there are a number of broken links, differences in the links established in the left-side menubar, missing <alt tags> describing graphics, etc. The site offers some really nice information to the user. For the detailed evaluation, see Appendix 2.11.

DISCUSSION

Overall, all of the GACC websites met the basic template format to include a top banner and a left-side menubar, although a few sites may have stretched the intent of the template to suit their needs. This is not to say they were wrong, they just has a little different idea. The average score for all sites was 78 and a median score of 78. Three sites fell below 70 and two were above 90.

Throughout the review and evaluation process, a number of discussion topics arose which affected the review process as well as the final product. We discussed the amount of input NGWC should have in determining standards, what kind of repercussions should occur for those that did not meet the standard, specific information that should be posted to each site page, left-side menubar changes, among others.

It seems that all GACCs made the initial attempt to follow the original template as close as possible with respect to the top banner and left-side menubar, with the exception of one. One area of the template stood out the most as being so divergent. That is the content area. Some sites put a lot of emphasis into the content area, while others showed a bit less emphasis.

As noted before, we found a number of broken links on almost all sites. It is obvious to the committee that continuous maintenance is either lacking or time constraints and other workloads keep the pages from being updated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Immediate

1. On the left-side menubar, change the FirstGov.gov (www.firstgov.gov) graphic and link to USA.gov (www.usa.gov).
2. Add a link to Adobe Reader (<http://www.adobe.com/products/reader/>) on any page that requires one to open a .pdf file.
3. Review all titles at the top of each page to ensure they are standardized throughout the site. For example, the title should include the GACC name (or abbreviation) followed by the page name (i.e. NRCC | Logistics | Aviation or Northern Rockies Coordination Center | Logistics | Aviation).
4. All site managers should test their site to ensure they can be viewed as a text-only page. For example, remove the .CSS file and see if the page can be read from top to bottom in a logical, sequential order.
5. All site managers should review their site for broken links. Corrections should be subsequently made.
6. All site managers should review all graphic and image files to ensure that <alt> tags are inserted properly.
7. All sites should have a page which defines the Predictive Services Unit and program at the GACC. This page should be linked from the Predictive Services header on the left-side menubar.
8. Because all of the GACC sites are available to the public, all “About Us” pages should have the following sub-categories with proper information provided: (1) AREA – Define boundaries and cooperating agencies within the Geographic Area; (2) COORDINATING GROUP – definition as to how the Area Coordinating Group works in the Area and its relationship to the GACC; (3) GACC – define or describe the function of the GACC as well as providing information on the positions that work within the Center (an organizational chart will suffice, names and pictures of staff is optional); (4) DISPATCH CENTERS – define how the Area is delineated by dispatch area / center (include map and phone numbers, if feasible).
9. Insert verbiage in the Implementation Guide for the left-side menubar to state that GACCs have the option of inserting addition links below the initial sub-headers. For example, the GACC has the option of inserting All-Risk, ROMAN, GIS, FBAN/LTAN, Maps, and Imagery links on the menubar below the OUTLOOKS sub-header, under Predictive Services.
10. Change verbiage for 5.2.A Screen to “No fixed size of the page is required. However, each screen will be designed such that the full page can be printed.”
11. All sites should have a “Dispatch Operations” page. This page should include general links relative to Dispatch that cannot be found elsewhere on the site. It may include reference materials, forms, Area Dispatch Centers, ROSS, IQCS, etc. Insert a new link as the first link on the left-side menubar under the Logistics / Dispatch header titled “Dispatch Operations” and link to the newly created “Dispatch Operations” page.

12. All sites should change the “Financial Management” link on the left-side menubar to “Incident Business Management” if they have not already done so.
13. All sites need to be evaluated through a code validation program, such as <http://validator.w3.org> or Bobby, for Section 508 - Accessibility and Compliance purposes. New version of Dreamweaver (Adobe CS3) will do this for you, if preferred.

2. Future

1. Intelligence and Predictive Services Meteorologists should discuss headers on the Intelligence and Weather pages, respectively, to determine if they are appropriate or should be changed, and they are going to the same location (i.e. National links).
2. Intelligence and Predictive Services Meteorologists should review links under each header to ensure link names are compatible and in same location on the page, and they are going to the same location (i.e. National links).
3. A small working group from GACC Logistics should be formed to review pages under Logistics / Dispatch for link name compatibility and link location, and they are going to the same location (i.e. National links).
4. Because there are so many national pages and each GACC seems to be linking to these pages, a discussion should occur as to whether a national page be created for each of the PS, Logistics/Dispatch, and Administrative pages, and each GACC site directly link to this page from the GACC page. For example, when one clicks on the Aviation page, one would see the Area-wide specific links on the left side of the content area and only one link on the right side to a National page where all national links are posted. This keeps each GACC from having the need to maintain national links on the Aviation page.
5. WEBSERVER: There are several issues that need to be pursued pertaining to the host webserver. For example, we need to insure (1) that we continue to have enough space on the server to host all sites including the potential to allow dispatch centers to participate (currently, we are using 5.2G of 6G available); (2) that enough bandwidth is available as we move toward digital production of some products (i.e. placing visual weather briefings online); (3) there is a means for evaluating the use or viewership of each page on the GACC site (i.e. general summary, monthly summary, directory report, etc); (3) the .PHP module is fully operational (i.e. can make forms operate and mail properly); and (4) we design a security and upload method that is easy and useful (i.e. webDAV, SSL, etc).

CONCLUSION

In building the GACC template, we've provided the user with an easy to navigate site and standardized much of the information. We've taken some of the guesswork out of the equation. In general, users no longer have to guess where a product is located on a GACC site when they move from one area to another on an assignment. They may not find their product every time, but they now know where it should be and/or whom to contact to ask the question. Links that are broken, graphics missing alt tags, and sub-headers changed or missing are easy fixes and should be corrected relatively soon after this report is published. Other topics will require additional discussion, but over time they will be resolved.

It was important that this review and evaluation be conducted at the three year mark after initial implementation. For example, one of the biggest concerns when establishing the initial template was the possibility of taking away the freedom of the GACC to display documents and products specific to their Geographic Area. From what was learned during the review, this is not a concern and should not be a concern in future template updates.

In conclusion, GACC websites are much further along today as a consistent and standardized product than at any time since they first came on the scene. This is important, but we are not there yet. As you can tell from the reviews there are still a number of issues and concerns that need to be addressed, however, if we continue to pursue excellence in this product, the GACC will better serve its customers, whether internal, external, or both.

Appendix

1. General GACC Review and Evaluation Form
2. Individual GACC Review and Evaluation Results (2.1 – 2.11)