



## **Bridger Teton National Forest Backcountry Tracking SOP with Teton Interagency Dispatch Center**

### **I. PURPOSE:**

To establish a call-in and call-out procedure (backcountry tracking) for all Forest employees and Forest volunteers (employees) traveling in the backcountry of the Bridger Teton National Forest (BTNF).

### **II. POLICY:**

When on duty, all employees of the Bridger Teton National Forest must adhere to the backcountry tracking procedure when traveling in the backcountry.

### **III. GENERAL:**

Backcountry Defined:

For purpose of this plan, backcountry refers to Forest lands that are essentially undeveloped or natural in character and are at least 300 feet from established roadways and developed areas.

Accounting for employees traveling in the backcountry is imperative. Just as private backcountry travelers are encouraged to leave their itinerary with a responsible party, employees of BTNF should do the same. While backcountry tracking cannot replace good judgment on the part of the backcountry traveler, implementation of backcountry tracking procedures will provide a degree of safety for both the backcountry traveler and the potential rescuers.

### **IV. PROCEDURE:**

#### 1) Responsibilities

The responsibility for tracking employees is shared by the employee, supervisors, District offices and dispatch.

Employees will follow the procedures outlined below for Trip pre-planning, check-in, monitoring, and check-out.

Dispatch will appropriately log employees during their morning, mid-patrol and evening checks.

Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that their employees understand and adhere to the backcountry tracking SOP's.

2) Trip pre-planning

Overnight travel:

All employees planning overnight backcountry travel will provide dispatch with a written travel itinerary using the Backcountry Travel Itinerary form. This form may be faxed to 739-3618, e-mailed to GTRE\_Dispatch@nps.gov, or hand delivered to the Teton Interagency Dispatch Center (TIDC). The employee **must** confirm that TIDC has the written itinerary before starting into the backcountry.

Single day travel:

Employees may, but are not required to, file a written travel itinerary for scheduled single day backcountry trips. However, intended deviations from the scheduled trip must be communicated to TIDC at the time of check-in. If the employee deviates from what is scheduled, the employee will communicate this to TIDC at that time.

3) Check-in procedure

A check-in at the beginning of each travel period must be made with TIDC. A check-in by radio is preferred and should occur just prior to entering the backcountry on a day trip or when the overnight traveler begins their work day.

**TIDC will not begin tracking employees in the backcountry until the EMPLOYEE initiates the tracking procedure.**

4) Monitoring and mid-patrol check-in procedure

Employees' backcountry tracking with TIDC should check-in approximately half way through their work day or patrol. This will accomplish two goals. One, TIDC, supervisors, and others will have a chance to relay information to the employee when they know the employee can communicate. Two, for backcountry tracking purposes, TIDC will know the employee's location roughly halfway through their day. This may narrow a potential search area by roughly half and also verifies the employee's status during the patrol.

5) Check-out procedure

A check-out when the employee exits the backcountry, or when the overnight traveler reaches the night's destination, must be made with TIDC. A check-out by radio is preferred. If the employee has exited the backcountry, he should confirm that he is terminating backcountry tracking at that time.

## 6) Communications

- a. Check-in and check-out contacts can either be done with TIDC or the District office. This will need to be specified on the backcountry itinerary form. Typically, weekday check-in and check-out contacts will be done with the District office during business hours and with TIDC on the weekend and after hours. If the District office does not respond to an expected check-in/out contact, or if it is after business hours, then the backcountry traveler can contact TIDC. TIDC will record the contact, but not be responsible for advising the District office. The District office will contact TIDC at a later time to confirm the contact for their records. If a backcountry traveler does not check-in/out as expected during business hours, the District office may request that TIDC periodically status check the traveler, but will need to specify when SAR procedures should be activated. Itineraries should be sent to both TIDC and the District office regardless of the check-in/out plan specified on the backcountry itinerary
- b. The check-in and check-out of service with TIDC should be done whenever possible by radio. Cellular telephone service may be available and used in areas where radio coverage is not available.
- c. Radios may fail and batteries can run down. Consideration should be given to this when traveling in the backcountry for an extended period of time. The backcountry traveler should use good judgment in deciding when it is appropriate to monitor radio traffic and when it is appropriate to turn off the radio to conserve the battery.
- d. Special consideration should be given to radio dead zones. If you expect to be in a radio dead zone during a scheduled check-in period, it is acceptable to make arrangements for this with dispatch. You must clearly state that you expect to be in a radio dead zone, that you will not be making a specific check-in, and when you WILL be checking in again with dispatch. Advise dispatch of your location and when your next check-in will be.
- e. Whenever possible, use check-in and check-out at points that have good repeater coverage. Also, transition points are a good place to initiate mid-patrol check-ins. For example, on a climb, that may be when you reach your high point and begin to descend. On a canyon patrol, that time may be when you reach your turnaround point or cross a divide and start down into a different canyon.
- f. Communications with dispatch for the purposes of this SOP will include the following specific verbiage:

Immediately before entering the backcountry:

“I am initiating backcountry tracking....”

At the start of a work day while already in the backcountry:

“This is my morning check-in....”

While already on a backcountry trip/patrol:

“This is my mid patrol check-in...[location/plan]...”

At the end of a work day when camping in the backcountry:

“This is my evening check-in...”

Immediately upon exiting the backcountry:

“I am terminating backcountry tracking....”

g. Examples of communications with the Teton Interagency Dispatch;

Teton Dispatch – Williams, (Reply: Williams)

Williams – *I am initiating backcountry tracking* as per my written itinerary that you have in Dispatch. I will be hiking the trail from the Cache Creek to Game Creek today.

(Reply: Initiating backcountry tracking, [time])

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Teton Dispatch – Smith, (Reply: Smith)

Smith – *I am initiating backcountry tracking* and am heading into Granite Creek today.

(Reply: Initiating backcountry tracking, [time])

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Teton Dispatch – Taylor, (Reply: Taylor)

Taylor - *This is my mid-patrol check-in*, I am at Togwotee Mountain Lodge and will be headed back to Blackrock via the CD trail on snowmobile.

(Reply: Copy mid-patrol check in, [time])

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Teton Dispatch – Brown, (Reply: Brown)

Brown - *I am terminating backcountry tracking* at the Horse Creek Trailhead, thank you.

(Reply: Terminating backcountry tracking, [time])

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Teton Dispatch – Langston, (Reply: Langston)

Langston – I will be approaching the Big Kahuna on the Snake River. I would like a status check in 10 minutes if you have not heard from me before then.

(Reply: Copy, status check in 10 at [time])

7) Failure to check-in or check-out

It is the responsibility of each backcountry traveler to adhere to these procedures. In the event of a missed check-in, (excluding mid-patrol check in) TIDC will attempt to contact the employee as outlined below. Attempts to contact the backcountry traveler should be made on surrounding Forest Service repeaters at each time interval.

- A.M. check-in is missed;** this applies only to backcountry travelers already on overnight patrols.

TIDC will make 3 attempts to contact the employee

- Dispatch will make the 1<sup>st</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 1000 hours.
- Dispatch will make a 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 1100 hours.
- Dispatch will make a 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 1200 hours.

□ **P.M. check-in is missed**

Teton Interagency Dispatch will make 3 attempts to contact

- Dispatch will make the 1<sup>st</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 1930 hours.
- Dispatch will make a 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 2000 hours.
- Dispatch will make a 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt to contact by radio at 2030 hours.

**Winter specific: The times for the PM check-in attempts will change to 1700, 1730 and 1800 during winter travel conditions.**

1) Notification and response

If the above efforts to contact the backcountry traveler have failed, TIDC will notify the employee's supervisor listed on the back-country form.

8) Alternative tracking options

Employees may conduct backcountry tracking with a supervisor and not with TIDC for brief visits to the backcountry. The supervisor is then responsible for knowing the planned route and reporting to TIDC if the employee is overdue.

9) Complex Patrols

Even though a written itinerary may exist, if the employee will be on a complex patrol such as climbing an obscure route or traveling cross country, the employee should discuss their plan with their supervisor. The supervisor should know exactly what the employee plans to do in the event that a search must be initiated.

10) Urgent Tracking

Temporary backcountry tracking may be warranted during certain times. These may include approaching an animal carcass, negotiating a steep

snow field or difficult stream crossing, scrambling on exposed rock, etc. The employee should keep the following in mind. "If the worst were to happen right now, how difficult would it be for a rescuer to find me and how long would it take?" Think about those who care for you and those who will come looking for you.

- 11) "Person Locator Beacons" (PLB's) or "Satellite Emergency Notification Devices" SEND are now provided by the Forest Service for use by backcountry travelers. The specific devices provided by the Forest Service now are SPOTs.

PLB's are to be used as a secondary notification only. PLB's are not to be used as a substitute for the backcountry tracking plan and are considered a last resort option. Expectations of the backcountry users are as follows:

Backcountry users are expected to adhere to the backcountry tracking plan and submit an itinerary for overnight outings. The itinerary form has been revised to include a space for the number of the PLB that the party will have with them. This must be filled in or TIDC will not know which party has sent a message.

Backcountry users are expected to make radio communication their primary form of contact. This includes communications for emergencies, check-in, and other non-emergency communications.

Normally the second choice would be cell or satellite phone.

Third, in the event that the backcountry users are not in areas with radio or cell phone coverage and they do not have a satellite phone, PLB's can be used. If radio/cell coverage is scratchy and there is not an emergency, backcountry users should make a reasonable effort to get to an area where communications are clear in order to make check-in and non-emergent help calls. If a check-in call can be made earlier in the day than expected via radio or cell phone, backcountry should do that rather than use the PLB later in the evening.

There may be critical emergencies, where SPOT activation me appropriate; for example an accident where the injured party may have radio coverage, but is unable to operate the radio

- a. For the SPOT devices being utilized on the BTNF, 3 types of messages can be sent:

**SOS**

Message sent to:

The service provider (SPOT), who will notify the **local 911 authorities** (Teton, Sublette, Lincoln, Fremont County Sheriff's Offices) and TIDC.

**The District Ranger** will also get this notification.

With this message being sent, backcountry users should expect a full SAR response. Timeframes and mode of response will vary depending on conditions, time of year, time of day, etc. Any additional information about the incident that can be provided to 911 authorities/TIDC by other members of the party who are able to get to a radio/cell phone coverage area would be helpful in order to better prepare rescuers.

**Check-in OK**

Message sent to:

**TIDC**

**District Ranger (DR)** and anyone one who has a delegation to serve as an acting DR will also get this notification.

This message should only be sent as a substitute for a morning/mid-day/evening check-in when the backcountry user is unexpectedly in an area without radio/cell phone coverage areas and did not plan in advance for a late day morning check-in (after 10am) or an early evening check-in. Those can be set up by being noted on the itinerary or in the field by calling during the afternoon and stating that “this will be my evening check-in” or when calling in an evening check-in, stating “do not expect my morning check-in tomorrow until 1100 hrs. “I do not expect to be in a coverage area until then”).

**Help, Non-Emergency**

Message sent to:

**District Ranger (DR)** and anyone one who has a delegation to serve as an acting DR will also get this notification

This message does **NOT** go to TIDC or a 911 agency.

This is meant to inform someone at the District level that you have been delayed, are not hurt, but may need some assistance. There is no way to specify your needs with this message. The DR or acting would attempt to contact you via radio, phone or in person by sending someone up the trail or waiting for you at a trailhead. Backcountry users who send this message should not expect to be rescued. They should not expect assistance to come in a timely manner or at all if they are in a remote location.

**If the situation does warrant a SAR, the SOS message should be sent.**

The capabilities of personal locator devices are rapidly changing and as new devices are developed, SPOT protocol on the Forest will likely continue to change.

