



SOUTHERN AREA INTERAGENCY PRIORITY TRAINEE PROGRAM STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES - 2026

Mission Statement

The primary mission of the Southern Area Interagency Priority Trainee Program is to establish a uniform process for identifying, promoting, and supporting the development of the interagency workforce within the Southern Area.

The program was created to address critical position shortages and support succession planning. Additionally, it aims to build capacity for Incident Management Teams (IMTs), dispatch operations, and national incident response efforts.

Definition of a Priority Trainee

The “Priority Trainee” designator reflects a responder from a Federal, State or local government agency in the Southern Area who has been identified, prioritized and approved to receive incident assignments to either fill a critical position shortage or for career development.

Examples are as follows:

1. **Critical Position Shortage** – The Southern Area Coordinating Group (SACG) has identified critical shortage positions on Southern Area IMTs or within agency fire management organizations. In this case, the priority trainee program is utilized to build capacity.
2. **Career Development** – The trainee has an established agency individual development plan with the target position identified. The trainee’s development will meet agency workforce succession planning goals. This includes development to attain the federal Interagency Fire Program Management Standard (IFPM) selective placement factors to compete for fire and aviation management positions.

Southern Area Priority Trainee Program Process

The Geographic Area Training Representative (GATR) will manage, implement and maintain the Southern Area priority trainee program, which includes the Priority Trainee List (PTL). During incident activity GATRs in each Geographic Area collaborate to share opportunities for mobilization of priority trainees. GATRs coordinate with the GACC, IMT’s, NIMO’s and hosting Agency Administrators to ensure the National Priority Trainee List is utilized.

Southern Area Priority trainees will be identified in accordance with the following protocols:

Nominations

Individuals may submit an online nomination for **one** priority trainee position at a time. This ensures a focused approach to attain the qualification. Once recommended for certification in the position, the Forest/Unit will notify the GATR and the priority trainee will be removed from the master list. The responder may then apply in another position and be added to the priority trainee master list.

Positions

The National Priority Trainee Program is designed for large fire support positions. Initial Attack positions are not included as part of the Southern Area Priority Trainee program. Those excluded initial attack positions include: Incident Commander Type 3, 4, and 5 (ICT3, ICT4, and ICT5); Dozer Operator (DZOP); Initial Attack Dozer Operator (DZIA).

Additional positions excluded from the Southern Area Priority Trainee program are Engine Boss (ENGB), Crew Boss (CRWB). Mobilization of trainees in these positions should be coordinated through local strategies.

Rating Criteria

Trainees are rated/scored on the Priority Trainee Nomination Form according to the following criteria:

1. Responder is currently a team member on a Prevention, Buying, Complex, or Type 3 team.
2. Completion percentage of position task book.
3. Position task book expiration date.
4. Number of trainee assignments completed.

Each of these criteria are assigned a point value on the application form output and utilized to prioritize trainees.

Roles and Responsibilities

Priority Trainee

- The trainee will work with their supervisor/Unit Fire Training Officer/Fire Management Officer to complete the Priority Trainee Application form by **March 20, 2026** for prioritization. Late nominations will be accepted through May 15, 2026 but will go to bottom the list for the selected position.
- Notify their Dispatch Center, via a phone call, email, or self-status, and the GATR, via PT Availability Form, when they are available for an assignment. Ideally, notification will occur 1-2 days prior to the first day of availability so that work on placing the responder can commence immediately.
- Status in the Interagency Resource Ordering Capability (IROC) as “Available Local” or “Available – Priority Trainee” while the GATR works on placing them. “Available National” will draw orders for positions that the trainee is qualified in.
- To verify that the GATR is aware of their availability and working on placement, check the “Available Trainees” list posted to the SACC website: <https://gacc.nifc.gov/sacc/overhead.php>
- Once the priority trainee has declared availability and the GATR is working on placement, if the PT takes an assignment in another position that is considered “one strike”. “Two strikes” and they will be removed from the priority trainee list for the remainder of the season.
- Check-in on the incident with the Incident Training Specialist (TNSP) or Plans to assure that they are identified as a trainee and assigned a coach/evaluator.

Unit Training Officer/Fire Management Officer (FMO)

- Unit Training Officers/FMO's serve as the foundation to assure the priority trainee program is implemented on their unit and available to all employees.
- Unit Training Officers/FMOs will ensure non-fire management employees (i.e., “militia” employees) are included in the priority trainee program.
- The Unit Training Officer/Fire Management Officer will work with the Center Managers to assure that the position on the application also appears in IROC. When the position is not listed, the application will be rejected.
- Serve as a point of contact between the trainees, SATWT representative and the Southern Area GATR.
- Will provide PTB certification updates to the GATR.

Southern Area Training Working Team (SATWT) Representatives

- Will collect applications from responders within their agency. Will determine agency priorities.
- Collaborate with TWT members to establish Southern Area trainee priorities by **March 30, 2026**.
- Each SATWT representative will provide certification updates to the Southern Area GATR as responders are recommended for certification.
- Ensures communication links are established between key

players.Geographic Area Training Representative (GATR)

- Responsible for implementation and management of the Southern Area Priority Trainee Program.
- Will maintain the annual Southern Area consolidated Priority Trainee spreadsheet and provide it to the SACC by **May 29, 2026**.
- Working with the SACC Floor Leader, Incident Training Specialists and other GATRs will solicit assignments for trainees within and outside the Geographic Area.
- In collaboration with the R8 USFS Partnership Council and in the interest of “transparency” will maintain a list of priority trainee assignments, available for review by the field, posted to the SACC website as “Assigned Priority Trainees”:
<https://gacc.nifc.gov/sacc/overhead.php>
- During heightened activity will provide the SACC Floor Leader with a “SA Daily Available Priority Trainee” list to post on the SACC web page.
- When multiple priority trainees in the same position have declared availability, place according to the priorities established by the TWT.
- Trainees who have not declared availability will not be contacted for an assignment.
- Once the priority trainee has declared availability their Duty Officer, Dispatcher, Unit Training Officer or the trainee will be informed by the GATR of the progress in getting them placed.
- Will conduct periodic reviews of trainees to determine barriers to availability, recommendations for certification, position changes (moves or details), and clean-up/maintenance of the priority trainee list.
- Will train and develop Geographic Area Priority Trainee Coordinators (GAPTC) to assist in coordinating and mobilizing SA priority trainees and to serve as back-ups to the GATR.
- During heightened activity in the Southern Area, will train and develop “Workforce Development Liaisons” to liaison with deployed TNSP’s, network the TNSP’s, explain the Southern Area Priority Trainee program to firefighters in the field, collaborate with the IMT’s, etc.
- Will produce an annual Southern Area Priority Trainee report containing information on the successes and opportunities to improve of the program.

Southern Area Coordination Center (SACC)

- The Southern Area Coordination Center will maintain communications with the GATR when orders for trainees are received.
- Will post Southern Area PTL to the SACC website.
- Will host the “SA Daily Trainee Availability” on the SACC website.
- Will honor name requests for priority trainees within the SA and nationally. The IROC “Special Needs” field must indicate that the name request is for a Priority Trainee.

Priority Trainee’s Host Dispatch Centers

- The Host Dispatch Centers will ensure accurate IROC availability of priority trainee resources, statused as “Available – Local” or “Available – Priority Trainee”.
- Communicates with the Unit Training Officer/Forest Fire Management Officer and GATR regularly identifying issues or concerns related to the SA Priority Trainee program or priority trainee assignments.

2026 Nomination Timelines

| Timeframe | Task | Responsibility |
|------------|---|-----------------------|
| February 5 | Priority trainee announcement and application released to field. | GATR / SACC |
| March 20 | Cut-off date for prioritized nominees. Late nominations accepted through May 15. | Applicants |
| March 30 | SATWT compiles all unit nominations, generates Agency-wide consolidated priority trainee list, and provides it to the GATR. | SATWT Representatives |
| May 15 | Last day to submit late nominations. | Applicants |
| May 29 | GATR submits annual Southern Area Priority Trainee List to the Southern Area Coordination Center. | GATR |
| May 31 | Southern Area Priority Trainee Mobilization processes are implemented for the season. | All |

Southern Area Training Working Team Members:

<https://gacc.nifc.gov/sacc/satwt.php>