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Using the ICS 213 General Message Form

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To Whom It May Concern:

This letter contains guidance for composing messages using the ICS-213 General Message form.

Background: Messages sent and received by ARES/RACES communicators during an event or incident are either 'formal' or 'informal'. The majority are 'informal' (sometimes called 'tactical') messages and are simply an exchange of information without a specific format. Informal traffic moves from the sender to the recipient verbally and may, or may not, be written down.

Formal traffic, on the other hand, is always sent, received, and delivered to the recipient, word for word, in written form. Formal messages are the best option when a record of the message is needed and/or when the content of the message needs the precision of a written message.

In general, formal message formats have three parts. A header containing information about who created the message, when the message was created, and to whom it is intended. A body part containing the words, numbers, and other elements of the message text. And finally a signature part including the name (and sometimes the actual signature) along with the position or title of the sender.

Formal messages are composed, transmitted, received, and delivered using specific formats. Several are in general usage. In the National Traffic System, most messages are in the ARRL Radiogram format. Other formats include the MARSGRAM, Salvation Army SATERN message, Red Cross message, and others including the ICS-213 General Message form.

Since ARES/RACES communicators operate as agents of a served agency, the format for formal messages may be dictated by the served agency. The incident command system, codified in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and required by Wisconsin statutes¹, is the system used to manage emergency incidents and many planned events. One of the many ICS standard forms is the venerable ICS-213 General Message form.

¹ Section 323.13 Wisconsin Statutes.

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The ICS-213 was originally designed as more of an interoffice memo than as a format for formal message traffic. Over the years however, even though it is not perfectly suited to the purpose, the ICS-213 has been pressed into service for sending and receiving incident or event messages and has become the de facto message form for ICS-managed operations.

ICS-213 Features and Shortcomings: The original intent of the ICS-213 was that a message could be written, then given to a runner who delivered it to the recipient. If a reply was necessary, the recipient could write it on the bottom of the message form which would then be delivered to the next recipient or the message originator.

The ICS-213 format does have elements that lend it to formal message usage. It has a header, made up of numbered fields or 'blocks'. The message recipient is block 2. The message originator is block 3. A subject line, block 4, and the date and time the message was originated, blocks 5 and 6. It has a body part for the message text, block 7, and a signature part, including space for message approval numbered block 8.

In addition, there is a second body part, block 9, for recording a message reply if there be one, and a second signature part, block 10, for the name of the individual who replied followed by the date and time of the reply.

That said, the ICS-213 has some definite shortcomings that detract from its usefulness. There is no space for a message number, message precedence, or a space for a 'check'. The check is the number of words, numbers, and other elements in the message body. Amateur radio operators depend on these elements to organize and confirm the accuracy of a message. Sending a message reply using blocks 9 and 10 can also be cumbersome, especially if a new message number is issued.

To get around these shortcomings, various ARES/RACES groups modified the ICS-213 adding blocks for a message number, precedence, and a check. However, the March 2015 version of ARRL's ARES operations manual strongly discouraged these modifications, or for that matter any modifications to any of the ICS forms including the ICS-213, in effect removing message friendly elements like message numbers, precedence words, and check fields.

All of the above leads to the heart of this letter:

The ICS-213 Workaround: In order to incorporate a message number, precedence word, and check in the ICS-213 without modifying the message form, communicators are encouraged to include those elements in block 4, the message subject line. To do that, the message header should be formatted as:

In an original message:

1. Blocks 1 through 3 are completed in the usual manner.



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2. The subject line, block 4, should be formatted as, “Message number xxx”, followed by a precedence word, then “in yyy groups”, optionally followed by a few words about the subject of the message. In this format ‘xxx’ is a sequential message number. Available precedence words are ‘Routine’, ‘Priority’, ‘Welfare’, or ‘Emergency’ and ‘yyy’ is the check.
3. Blocks 5 and 6 are completed in the usual manner.

Block 7, the message text, is completed as usual and the number of groups in the text becomes the message check.

If the recipient wishes to send a reply, he or she completes blocks 9 and 10 and the reply is sent on to its next recipient with the same message number as the original message. This, however, requires some manipulation in the message header:

1. For the reply to be routed correctly, block 2 ‘From’ and block 3 ‘To’ need to be updated.
2. Blocks 5 and 6, ‘Date’ and ‘Time’, are left unchanged and are not sent as part of the reply since the reply date and time are included in block 10.
3. The subject line (block 4) should be re-worded, “Reply message number xxx”, a precedence word, “in zzz groups”, followed by the original message subject, if any. The ‘xxx’ is the number of the original message and ‘zzz’ is the number of groups in block 9, the reply text.
4. The text of the original message in block 7 is not sent.

All this sounds more complicated than it actually is as the attached examples demonstrate.

Completing the ICS-213 General Message form: Completing most blocks in the ICS-213 is generally straightforward.

Block 1 ‘Incident Name’ is an optional block: It is intended to capture the name of the incident, if desired by the served agency. It can just as easily be easily used for the name of a pre-planned event.

Block 2 ‘To (Name and Position)’: are self-explanatory. Including the sender’s title or position makes it possible to route the message to the person staffing a particular ICS position in case a personnel change has occurred.

Block 3 ‘From (Name and Position)’: are, again, self-explanatory.

Block 4 ‘Subject’: Format as described in ‘The ICS-213 Workaround’ part of this letter.

Block 5 ‘Date’: Self-explanatory.

Block 6 ‘Time’: This is the time the message is originally drafted, not the time it is transmitted. The time should be followed by a ‘Z’ if using Universal (Zulu) time or ‘L’ if the time is in local time.



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Block 7 'Message': This is the text of the original message. The text should be as brief as possible while making the meaning and intent of the message clear.

Block 8 'Approved by': Includes the printed name and title or position of the originator. In all cases, the message originator must approve the message text by his or her signature before the message is sent.

Block 9 'Reply': This field is for the text of a reply, if any, to the original message. As with block 7, it should be as brief as possible without detracting from the meaning and intent of the reply message.

Block 10 'Replied by': This is the printed name and position or title of the individual replying. By signing the message form in block 10, the individual replying approves the reply text.

Message Documentation: It is very important that every formal message and every message reply sent and received be documented for posterity. The communicator sending and the communicator receiving a message should place of copy into a permanent file (either physical or electronic) and note the date and time the message was sent or received in the ICS-214 'Activity Log' or in the station log. As with message forms, all ICS-214's and/or station logs should also be placed in a permanent physical or electronic file.

Station Log: There is no formal ICS radio station log form. However, several ARES/RACES organizations have devised log forms. The ACS²/RACES ICS-309 Form serves the purpose well and a copy is attached.

73

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Attachments:

Attachment 1: Example original message


Attachment 2: Example reply message

Attachment 3: Blank ICS-213 General Message


Attachment 4: ACS/RACES IC-309 ACS/RACES Communications Log

² Auxiliary Communications Service

GENERAL MESSAGE (ICS 213)

1. Incident Name (Optional):		
2. To (Name and Position): Frank Jones, Logistics Section Chief		
3. From (Name and Position): Brian Smith, 3 rd Street Shelter Manager		
4. Subject: Message 14 Routine in 13 groups, bottled water needed	5. Date: 5/23/2014	6. Time: 1510L
7. Message: Third Street shelter needs 14 cases of bottled water in todays supply run		
		
8. Approved by: Name: Brian Smith	Signature: _____	Position/Title: 3 rd St Shelter Mgr
9. Reply:		
10. Replied by: Name:	Position/Title:	Signature: _____
IC § 213	Date/Time: Date	

GENERAL MESSAGE (ICS 213)

1. Incident Name (Optional):	
2. To (Name and Position): Brian Smith, 3 rd Street Shelter Manager	
3. From (Name and Position): Frank Jones, Logistics Section Chief	
4. Subject: Reply Message 14 Routine in 9 groups, bottled water needed	5. Date: Date
	6. Time: HHMM
7. Message: Third Street Shelter needs 14 cases of bottled water in todays supply run	
8. Approved by: Name: Brian Smith Signature: Position/Title: 3 rd St Shelter Mgr	
9. Reply: Only 12 cases of water can be delivered today 	
10. Replied by: Name: Frank Jones Position/Title: Logistics Sec Chf Signature:	
ICS 213	Date/Time: 5/23/2014 3:45 PM

Note that Blocks 5,6,7 and 8 are NOT sent in the reply message!