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Using the ICS 213 General Message Form

31 January 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

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

Background: Most 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 not usually 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. The header includes information about who and when the message was created and to whom it is intended. The body includes the words and numbers in the text of the message. The signature is the name (and sometimes the signature) and position or title of the sender.

Formal messages are composed, transmitted, received, and delivered using a specific format. There are several in general usage. In the ARRL's National Traffic System, most messages are in the Radiogram format. Other formats include the MARSGRAM, Salvation Army SATERN, Red Cross, 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 forms available in the ICS is the venerable ICS-213.

The ICS-213 General Message form was originally designed as more of an interoffice memo than as a format for formal messages. Over the years however, even though it is not perfectly

¹ Section 323.13 Wisconsin Statutes.



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suited to the purpose, it 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 composed and 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 returned to the person who originated it.

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', for recording who the message recipient is (block 2), who originated the message (block 3), a subject line (block 4), and the date and time the message was originated (blocks 5 and 6). It has a body, space for the message text (block 7), and a signature part including a field for message approval (block 8). In addition, it has a second body part for recording a message reply (block 9), should there be one, and a second signature part (block 10) for the name of the individual who replied along with 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 nor is there space for a 'check'. A message check is the number of words, numbers, and other elements in the message body. Amateur radio operators depend on these elements to organize messages and confirm that the message is received exactly as it was sent. 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 form adding blocks for a message number and check field. In the March 2015 version of the ARES operations manual the ARRL strongly discouraged these modifications, or for that matter any modifications, to any of the ICS forms including the ICS-213 in effect removing message numbers, check fields, and other message-friendly elements.

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

The ICS-213 Workaround: In order to incorporate a message number and check in the ICS-213 without modifying the message form, ARES/RACES communicators are encouraged to include those elements in the message subject line (block 4). The message header should be formatted as follows:

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 in yyy groups", followed by a few words about the subject of the message. In this format 'xxx' is a sequential message number and 'yyy' is the check.

3. Blocks 5 and 6 are completed in the usual manner.

If the recipient wishes to send a reply, he or she completes blocks 9 and 10 and the reply is sent back to its originator. This, however, requires some manipulation in the message header:

1. For the reply to be routed correctly, information in the 'From' field (block 2) of the original message needs to be moved to the 'To' field (block 3) and vice-versa.
2. The 'Date' and 'Time' fields (blocks 5 and 6) are left blank since the reply date and time are included in the reply 'Date/Time' field (block 10).
3. The subject line (block 4) should be worded, "Reply message number xxx in zzz groups", followed by the original message subject. In this case, xxx is the number of the original message and zzz is the number of groups in the reply text (block 9).
4. The text of the original message (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': This 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)': 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)': 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.

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 clear.



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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 in block 8 before the message is sent.

Block 9 'Reply': This optional 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': When a reply message is entered, 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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Wisconsin RACES Chief Radio Officer

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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: Frank Jones Signature: _____ Position/Title: 3 rd St Shelter Mgr		
9. Reply:		
10. Replied by: Name: _____ Position/Title: _____ Signature: _____		
ICS 213	Date/Time: Date	

ICS 213

General Message

Purpose. The General Message (ICS 213) is used by the incident dispatchers to record incoming messages that cannot be orally transmitted to the intended recipients. The ICS 213 is also used by the Incident Command Post and other incident personnel to transmit messages (e.g., resource order, incident name change, other ICS coordination issues, etc.) to the Incident Communications Center for transmission via radio or telephone to the addressee. This form is used to send any message or notification to incident personnel that requires hard-copy delivery.

Preparation. The ICS 213 may be initiated by incident dispatchers and any other personnel on an incident.

Distribution. Upon completion, the ICS 213 may be delivered to the addressee and/or delivered to the Incident Communication Center for transmission.

Notes:

- The ICS 213 is a three-part form, typically using carbon paper. The sender will complete Part 1 of the form and send Parts 2 and 3 to the recipient. The recipient will complete Part 2 and return Part 3 to the sender.
- A copy of the ICS 213 should be sent to and maintained within the Documentation Unit.
- Contact information for the sender and receiver can be added for communications purposes to confirm resource orders. Refer to 213RR example (Appendix B)

Block Number	Block Title	Instructions
1	Incident Name (Optional)	Enter the name assigned to the incident. This block is optional.
2	To (Name and Position)	Enter the name and position the General Message is intended for. For all individuals, use at least the first initial and last name. For Unified Command, include agency names.
3	From (Name and Position)	Enter the name and position of the individual sending the General Message. For all individuals, use at least the first initial and last name. For Unified Command, include agency names.
4	Subject	Enter the subject of the message.
5	Date	Enter the date (month/day/year) of the message.
6	Time	Enter the time (using the 24-hour clock) of the message.
7	Message	Enter the content of the message. Try to be as concise as possible.
8	Approved by <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Name• Signature• Position/Title	Enter the name, signature, and ICS position/title of the person approving the message.
9	Reply	The intended recipient will enter a reply to the message and return it to the originator.
10	Replied by <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Name• Position/Title• Signature• Date/Time	Enter the name, ICS position/title, and signature of the person replying to the message. Enter date (month/day/year) and time prepared (24-hour clock).

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:		
8. Approved by: Name: _____ Signature: _____ Position/Title: _____		
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	

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GENERAL MESSAGE (ICS 213)

1. Incident Name (Optional):		
2. To (Name and Position):		
3. From (Name and Position):		
4. Subject:	5. Date: Date	6. Time HHMM
7. Message:		
8. Approved by: Name: _____ Signature: _____ Position/Title: _____		
9. Reply:		
10. Replied by: Name: _____ Position/Title: _____ Signature: _____		
ICS 213	Date/Time: Date	

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