

Interoperability – Amateur and Non-Amateur Stations

Interoperability between amateur radio stations and federal stations (those administered by the NTIA – the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, part of the United States Department of Commerce) is authorized under certain circumstances by the United States Code of Federal Regulations, Title 47, Chapter I, §97. The pertinent sub-sections, §97.111 and §97.407, can be outlined as follows.

Communications permitted all the time:

- §97.111(a)(1) – With other amateur stations (except when prohibited by the other country).

Communications permitted during emergencies and disasters:

- §97.111(a)(2) – Essential communication needs and to facilitate relief actions.
- §97.111(a)(3) – With another FCC-regulated service.

Communications under RACES specifically authorized by the civil defense organization for the area served:

- §97.407(d)(1) – Public safety or national defense or security.
- §97.407(d)(2) – Immediate life safety, protection of property, law and order, human suffering/need, combating of armed attack or sabotage.
- §97.407(d)(3) – Public information or instructions in civil defense and relief.

Communications permitted at other times, including drills and exercises:

- §97.111(a)(4) & §97.407(d)(4) – With the US government when conducting RACES training (as ordered by the responsible civil defense organization served, limited to one hour per week).
- §97.111(a)(5) – With non-FCC stations when authorized by the FCC.
- §97.111(a)(5) – With US military stations on Armed Forces Day (always on the third Saturday in May per Presidential Proclamation 3399 dated 18 March 1961).

Interoperability practice with NTIA-licensed stations (FEMA, military, etc.) is essential to prepare for emergency/disaster communications. However, amateur radio transmissions for drills and exercises can ONLY be made when there is either authorization from the FCC under §97.111(a)(5), or an order from a civil defense authority under §97.111(a)(4) and §97.407(d)(4). In either case there will be a proper governmental paper trail. The exercise organizers should provide a copy of the enabling FCC or RACES document for radio amateurs to keep with their station logs should any question ever arise regarding the legality of amateur station transmissions when operating outside of the requirements of §97.111(a)(1). To be safe, if those are not published, then do not transmit.

Before contacting an NTIA station in an exercise, picture yourself standing before an Administrative Law Judge and defending your actions. A statement like “I think it was permitted” or “I read it in an exercise plan” may be dismissed as hearsay. If you have written evidence to support your claim, you will be in a far better position to protect against losing your license and/or avoid incurring a monetary fine.

When participating in an interoperability exercise with non-amateur stations, radio amateurs are advised to secure a copy of the enabling FCC or RACES document to keep with their station log.