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Firearms Safety Program

The U.S. Geological Survey provides appropriate firearms safety training for any employee or USGS volunteer who uses, handles, carries, or stores a firearm as a part of his or her official duties. Firearms are used by USGS employees for defense against potentially dangerous wild animals and for specimen collecting for biological research. Firearms may also be used for signaling and survival in emergency situations.

In 1978, the USGS developed firearms safety training for defense against wild animals following a near-fatal attack on a USGS geologist during the 1977 field season in Alaska. The firearms safety training for personnel involved in specimen collection (biological research) was developed after the National Biological Service was integrated into the USGS as the Biological Resource Discipline (BRD) in 1997.

Although firearms safety remains a constant emphasis and is a key element of any firearms safety training program, there are substantial differences in the two programs. In the USGS Defense Against Wild Animals (DAWA) training program, firearms are restricted to those action and model types that can handle powerful, large-caliber cartridges. The firearm is a tool of last resort and is only used when other deterrents are exhausted or impractical. The Specimen Collection (SC) training program deals with a broad range of firearm types, from rimfire to large-bore calibers, and includes almost every type of firearm action, make, and model.

USGS firearms policy and training methodology have continually improved since the tragic incident in 1977. Current doctrines are the result of extensive field experience by USGS personnel, and many of the training concepts have been adapted from professional firearms training schools. Both the DAWA and the SC firearms training programs are constantly changing as new information from actual field experiences is incorporated into the curriculum and firearms training techniques from other professional training programs are reviewed and tested.

A number of more specialized USGS Firearms Safety curriculums are being developed to better address USGS training needs. In addition to the DAWA program, separate curriculums and courses are being developed that include Wild Animal (Bear, Cougar, etc.) Behavior, Bear Pepper Spray and Other Less-lethal Deterrents for Wild Animals, Collection of Waterfowl, Precision Shooting, and Small-Caliber Firearms for Trapping. Others will be added as needed.

Pepper Spray Instructors Training, 03-25-02

These curriculums will have specific instructor certifications, and USGS personnel and managers will soon be able to choose which type(s) of training will best satisfy their science program needs.

Obtaining Firearms Authorization

With supervisory permission, any employee or volunteer can be authorized to carry a firearm while on official duty once he or she has completed the following requirements, as specified in Chapter 29 of the Occupational Safety and Health Program Requirements Handbook, SM 445-2-H. These include:

1. Successful completion of the appropriate Basic or Refresher Firearms Safety Training Course as listed in Ch. 29.3, part B, Firearms Training, http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/445-2-h/ch29.html.

2. Completion of a Certificate of Need as listed in Ch. 29.3, part A, Certificate of Need and Qualification Inquiry: http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/445-2-h/a291.doc.

3. Completion of a Qualification Inquiry, as listed in Ch. 29.3, part A, Certificate of Need and Qualification Inquiry: http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/445-2-h/a292.doc.

USGS Firearms Instructors must be able to independently and effectively teach the fundamentals of firearms safety and safe firearms handling. Instructor certification requires approximately 150 hours of formal training including a USGS Firearms Instructor Class and apprenticing as an assistant instructor. Detailed requirements for USGS firearms instructorship are listed in SM-445-H, Ch. 29.3, part D, Firearms Instructors, http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/445-2-h/ch29.html.

USGS Firearms Instructor Course for Defense Against Wild Animals, Santa Clara, CA, 2002.

Storage, Security, and Transport

Details for firearms storage, security, and transport are found in section 29.5 of the USGS Physical Security Handbook at http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/440-2-h.html.

1. All firearms and ammunition shall be stored in a secure area under lock and key in accordance with USGS Physical Security Handbook (sections 10-4 to 10-7), SM 440-2-H at http://www.usgs.gov/usgs-manual/handbook/hb/440-2-h.html.

2. A U.S. Department of the Interior memo on Child Safety Locking Devices for Handguns implies that any firearm (government or personally owned) used by USGS personnel shall be under lock and key when (1) not being used in the field, (2) in transit, or (3) the firearm is not under the direct control of the cognizant person.

3. Firearms and ammunition transported on commercial airlines must be declared, and a signed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) tag, stating that the firearm is unloaded, must be with the firearm. For field aircraft, the firearm must be declared to the pilot or authorized representative prior to boarding.

4. Any personnel authorized to use a firearm must follow the State and municipal laws concerning the transportation and mode of carry of firearms in motor vehicles.

5. Any personnel authorized to use a firearm must follow the State and municipal laws concerning the personal carry of firearms. Only Bureau-authorized firearms may be carried. State permits authorizing concealed carry are not recognized by the USGS.

Contact Information

Both Bureau and regional management personnel oversee the USGS Firearms Safety Program. For further information on USGS firearms regulations, policies, and training, contact the appropriate person(s) as follows:

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