



Event Type: Accidental Satellite Emergency SOS Activation

Date: August 30, 2026

Location: Bobcat Lakes Fire, Montana

The Story and Lessons from this Accidental Satellite Emergency SOS Activation Incident

During ongoing operations on the Bobcat Lakes Fire, a satellite-based emergency notification was inadvertently transmitted from a personal mobile device (a personally-owned smartphone) carried by an assigned incident resource (a sawyer on a Type 2 IA crew).

This notification, received by the local County Sheriff's Office, was characterized on their end as indicating a possible crime in progress, with a plotted latitude/longitude location falling within the Bobcat Lakes Fire's operational area.

The Sheriff's Office contacted the incident's Liaison Officer (LOFR) to inquire about the notification and confirm whether it corresponded to a known incident resource or activity. The LOFR immediately relayed the report to the Safety Officer (SOFC). The Safety Officer notified the Operations Section Chief, the Incident Commander, and the incident Security Manager to ensure command awareness and to begin verification.

The Security Manager and Safety Officer worked directly with the Sheriff's Office to cross-reference the reported coordinates against resource assignments and location. Through this coordination, it was confirmed that the alert originated from an accidental activation of the Emergency SOS via a satellite feature on the resource's personal iPhone, and that no legitimate emergency or criminal activity was occurring. The Sheriff's Office was able to stand down without further response.

What You Should Know About Satellite Emergency Messaging-Related Terminology and Protocols

Reporting terminology varied between the receiving agency and the incident. The alert was referred to informally as an "inReach notification," though it was confirmed to have originated from the resource's personal iPhone, not a dedicated satellite communicator.

Satellite emergency messaging is provided by more than one system. For example: Apple's iPhone Emergency SOS via satellite—which uses the Globalstar network—versus Garmin inReach devices—which use the Iridium network and route through the GEOS International Emergency Response Coordination Center.

These systems have different routing pathways to 911/Dispatch. Confirming which platform generated an alert is a useful early step in verification, because it helps narrow down which assigned resource is likely carrying the originating device.

This can be done by asking the Dispatcher who actually called them and how that caller identified themselves—an Apple relay center specialist or GEOs/Garmin Response coordinator. It is standard practice for both platforms to identify themselves when contacting 911.

Also ask whether the alert arrived as a native text (pointing to Apple, if the PSAP is text-to-911 capable) or as a voice call on the 911 trunk (which either system can produce, but is the only path Garmin/GEOS uses).

Finally, have the Dispatcher read back the phone number tied to the alert and cross-check it against the incident's resource roster. Apple transmits the user's verified phone number automatically. Therefore, a match confirms both the platform and the individual. This is ultimately how this incident was resolved.

Discussion/Contributing Factors

- Modern smartphones (iPhone 14 and, later, all models) now ship with built-in satellite emergency messaging. This means that almost any assigned resource may be carrying a personally-owned device capable of triggering an off-grid 911 alert—not just personnel issued dedicated satellite communicators (such as Garmin inReach and SPOT). This capability can be triggered unintentionally through button presses in a pack or pocket, physical impact, or accidental long-presses of the side/volume buttons—particularly during arduous fireline work, hiking, or off-road travel.
- Because Emergency SOS via satellite is a standard/always-on feature of personal iPhones rather than an opt-in device that personnel choose to carry, resources may not be aware that they are carrying satellite SOS capability. Furthermore, Incident Management Teams (IMT) generally have no inventory or policy addressing personally-owned devices.
- Satellite SOS alerts route outside normal incident communications channels directly to a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) or, if the local PSAP does not support satellite/text-to-911, to a third-party relay center or coordination center, which then contacts local Dispatch. This means an accidental activation by incident personnel can reach local law enforcement/EMS before the incident organization—or even the person carrying the device is aware anything happened.
- An Apple Emergency SOS via satellite session opens with a *“What’s the emergency?”* screen that includes a *“Crime”* option alongside categories such as Fire, Medical, and Vehicle. An accidental activation still walks through this same questionnaire. And an inadvertent tap can land on *“Crime”* just as easily as any other category. Because the Dispatcher receives a completed questionnaire response rather than free text, there’s no way to tell if the selection was unintentional or not. Local Dispatch Centers and Sheriff’s Offices generally have no advanced knowledge of exact resource locations, assignments, or personal device use within an active fire’s operational area. This can lead to an alert being interpreted at face value rather than being quickly cross-referenced against known incident activity.
- No pre-established protocol existed between the IMT and the local Sheriff’s Office/Dispatch Center for rapidly verifying and responding to satellite SOS activation tied to assigned resources.
- Direct, immediate coordination between the LOFR, SOFC, Security Manager, and the Sheriff’s Office allowed for a quick resolution and prevented commitment of additional law enforcement or emergency resources to investigate.
- For more details on how the feature works, see: [Use Emergency SOS via satellite on your iPhone](#)

Lessons

- Satellite emergency messaging features built into personal mobile devices present a real, if infrequent, risk of accidental activation during field operations and can generate a law enforcement or EMS response independent of the incident’s own communications and accountability systems—without any prior decision by the resource to carry satellite-capable equipment.
- Terminology and system confusion (such as “inReach” used generically for any satellite alert) can slow initial understanding of which platform generated an alert and how it was routed—which is useful context when verifying with the receiving agency.
- Sharing incident perimeter maps, resource locations, or a point of contact with local dispatch/law enforcement in advance can significantly speed verification of alerts that plot within an active fire’s operational area.
- This event was resolved without incident. But the same scenario under different conditions (such as after-hours, remote area, unclear coordinates, or a genuinely at-risk resource) could pose higher stakes or greater difficulty in verification.

The Path Forward

1. Establish a predetermined protocol under which local 911 Dispatch, upon receiving a satellite SOS or other emergency notification that plots within an active incident's operational area, immediately contacts the incident's Communications Unit to coordinate validation of the alert and determine next steps. This would establish early, direct coordination as the mechanism for quickly separating incident-related activations from emergencies that require an independent response.
2. Develop a predetermined, written protocol—shared with local Dispatch—for verifying and standing down suspected accidental satellite SOS activations tied to assigned incident resources, including designated points of contact and expected response timeline.
3. Encourage local 911 centers and IMTs to establish this coordination as a standing practice for any incident, not only as an after-the-fact response. In doing so, protocols are in place before an activation occurs rather than being built in real time.
4. Include a briefing item in daily tailgate/safety meetings that specifically address personal mobile devices—because Emergency SOS via satellite is a built-in, always-on feature on all iPhone 14 and later models that personnel may not be aware of. Cover how it can be triggered accidentally and how to secure it (such as: screen lock settings, pack placement, awareness of side-button/volume-button behavior) during arduous or high-motion assignments, in addition to any guidance already given for issued satellite communicators.
5. Where practical, ask personnel to register accurate Medical ID and emergency contact information on their personal mobile devices. If a genuine activation does occur, responders will have accurate information to act on.
6. Capture accidental activation events on an ICS-214 (Incident Activity Log) and route them through the incident's after-action review process, to ensure that recurring coordination gaps with local Dispatch can be identified and corrected across future incidents.
7. Consider raising this topic at the Dispatch/GACC or state 911 authority level, because text-to-911 and satellite SOS routing capability varies by county and directly affects how quickly an accidental alert can be verified against known incident activity.

This RLS was submitted by:
Safety Officer

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?
(<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/submit-a-lesson>)

Share Your
Lessons