



# NWCG Standards for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

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The *NWCG Standards for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* establishes the use of a formal competency-based qualification process that allows any credentialing authority to recognize and account for competence acquired through life-long learning and experience. RPL is a process that evaluates an individual's formal and non-formal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required competencies to perform effectively in a specific emergency management or responder position. It is widely recognized that a standardized NWCG RPL process will reduce redundant training, support efforts to increase speed and time to competency, and support efforts to boost national resource surge capacity.

Federal agencies with responsibilities under the National Response Framework (NRF) are required to ensure that emergency response providers, incident management personnel, and any other personnel responding to a disaster declaration are credentialed and typed in accordance with 6 U.S.C. 320. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5) also sets minimum standards that emergency responders must meet.

Although local, state, tribal, and private sector partners are not required to be credentialed under these standards, as the primary first responders to any national disaster they are strongly encouraged to be fully credentialed. Many of these local first responders already hold some level of qualification in their current position. RPL is a tool that provides a means of achieving the more universal all risk credentialing of local and state-level responders and managers currently credentialed within their agencies. The benefit of having nationally credentialed local and state resources throughout the nation assures greater efficiency and effectiveness of multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional coordination when disasters occur.

NWCG member agencies, including state, local, and tribal, which participate in national wildfire response in the federal system under a Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Stafford Act Response Agreement are required to be credentialed under NWCG position qualifications. Several federal and state NWCG members and the All-Hazards Incident Management Teams Association (AHIMTA) have developed successful RPL processes. It is widely recognized that a standardized NWCG RPL process will reduce redundant training, support efforts to increase speed and time to competency, and support efforts to boost national resource surge capacity.

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The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) provides national leadership to enable interoperable wildland fire operations among federal, state, tribal, territorial, and local partners. NWCG operations standards are interagency by design; they are developed with the intent of universal adoption by the member agencies. However, the decision to adopt and utilize them is made independently by the individual member agencies and communicated through their respective directives systems.

# Table of Contents

<b>Section 1: National Disaster Response .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Section 2: National Incident Management System .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Section 3: Definition of Credentialing.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Section 4: Qualification .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Section 5: RPL Definition.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Section 6: Competency Versus Performance-Based Qualifications.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Section 7: Basic Tenets of RPL .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Section 8: NWCG Position Competencies .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 9: Home Unit/Agency .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 10: Home Unit/Agency Responsibilities for use of RPL.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 11: Initiating the Use of RPL in the Credentialing Process.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Section 12: Application for the use of RPL in Credentialing.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 13: Candidate’s Portfolio .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 14: Evaluation Panel .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Section 15: Evaluator Qualifications.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 16: Evaluation Process .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 17: Assessing the Portfolio .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 18: Evaluation Interview.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section 19: Check References .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Section 20: Determination of Competency .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Section 21: Decision Process .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Section 22: Documentation.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Section 23: Appeal Process.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Section 24: Summary of Minimum Standards and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>7</b>

## Section 1: National Disaster Response

September 11, 2001, demonstrated to America that, as emergency responders and emergency managers, we must plan, train, and exercise to respond together, thus assuring a coordinated, efficient, and effective response to all threats. A coordinated and effective response requires the multiple disciplines of our emergency management and emergency response systems, federal to state to local, be credentialed to a single standard, position by position.

## Section 2: National Incident Management System

Mandated by Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), Management of Domestic Incidents, and as outlined in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) P-501, NIMS provides a consistent nationwide template to enable federal, state, tribal, and local governments, and the private sector to work together to respond to and recover from the effects of incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity. HSPD-5 requires NIMS training for all federal emergency responders working in support of the NRF.

To ensure unity of effort, NIMS advocates standards to include training, experience, credentialing, validation, and physical and medical fitness. Federal, state, tribal, and local certifying agencies, and professional and private organizations with personnel involved in emergency management and incident response are encouraged to credential those individuals in their respective disciplines or jurisdictions. RPL recognizes the NIMS requirements for specified training for the purpose of “all-hazards” response.

## Section 3: Definition of Credentialing

NWCG recognizes the definition of credentialing from the Department of Homeland Security/FEMA as referred to by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007. This language provides:

“The terms ‘credentialed’ and ‘credentialing’ mean having provided, or providing, respectively, documentation that identifies personnel and authenticates and verifies the qualifications of such personnel by ensuring that such personnel possess a minimum common level of training, experience, physical and medical fitness, and capability appropriate for a particular position...”

The credentialing process entails the objective evaluation and documentation of an individual’s competence or proficiency to meet nationally accepted standards. This can take the form of current certification, licenses, degrees, training, and/or experience.

## Section 4: Qualification

NWCG qualifications are typically position-specific. The *NWCG Standards for Wildland Fire Position Qualifications*, PMS 310-1, <https://www.nwcg.gov/publications/310-1>, shall be the guiding document for NWCG qualifications essential for a position and should be part of a job task analysis. During the NWCG RPL process, this analysis should incorporate input from job incumbents, managers, industry, and others with knowledge of the position requirements.

Use of RPL for NWCG position qualification shall not circumvent or minimize course and training requirements for specific positions, as defined in the most current edition of PMS 310-1.

## **Section 5: RPL Definition**

RPL is a competency-based process that evaluates an individual's experience, formal and non-formal, to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required competencies of an emergency response position.

RPL is a qualification process used to determine a person's competency to do a job at a prescribed level for the basis of credentialing. RPL measures the candidate's demonstrated knowledge, skills, and experience (the overall performance) against national standard competencies established for specific jobs. The evaluation process focuses on candidates' ability to meet the established standards rather than how they acquired the knowledge, skills, or abilities. Candidates may have acquired their skills in another emergency response/services discipline, through formal training in a particular field, in the military, or through a combination of career employment experiences. Candidates should not be judged on where or how they learned to do a job, but rather their ability to do the job.

## **Section 6: Competency Versus Performance-Based Qualifications**

1. In a performance-based qualification system, qualification is based on completion of required training and demonstrated successful position performance by completing a Position Task Book (PTB). The primary criterion for qualification is the individual's performance as observed by a qualified evaluator. The PTB contains all critical tasks required to perform the job. The process of demonstrating the abilities to perform the position is the completion of a PTB. Many of the tasks being evaluated may require they be observed during an actual incident.
2. In a competency-based system for credentialing, a candidate demonstrates to qualified evaluators the competencies required to perform the job adequately. Skills are evaluated holistically using the combined knowledge, skills, and abilities required to demonstrate the level of competency in performing the job. A competency-based assessment process is an "outcomes-based" tool; it is designed to assess the candidate's ability to perform the duties of the position.

## **Section 7: Basic Tenets of RPL**

The NWCG RPL process will recognize the following basic tenets of RPL as a guide for NWCG members in developing an RPL program and during the RPL process.

1. RPL is a valid method of allowing candidates applying for a credential to claim credit for knowledge, skills, and abilities, regardless of how the individual acquired those skills.
2. RPL processes, procedures, and decisions must be consistent, reliable, and fair to ensure that users are confident of the results.
3. RPL candidates should be offered advice on the development of their portfolio and the types of evidence considered appropriate, to support a claim for credit through RPL.
4. The RPL assessment process must meet the same quality assurances and monitoring standards as any other valid form of assessment.
5. Using RPL as the assessment tool for credentialing will produce results of equal status to any other accepted assessment method. The award of credit through RPL will not be distinguished from any other credentialing process.

## **Section 8: NWCG Position Competencies**

1. Throughout this document, NWCG position competencies refer to duties and responsibilities outlined in the incident position descriptions (IPDs), <https://www.nwcg.gov/positions>. These IPDs provide minimum standards required to perform in the position. The RPL evaluation panel should reference the NWCG IPD during the candidate evaluation process.
2. The process in which a candidate acquires the skill sets required for qualification is flexible as long as final qualification remains within the NWCG identified competencies for a position.

## **Section 9: Home Unit/Agency**

The home unit/agency is the designated agency that employs the individual candidate seeking qualification under the RPL process. This could be at the local, state, regional, or national level. Documentation of training, experience, and the qualification process is the responsibility of the home unit/agency. Documentation of this process for contractors is the contractor's responsibility, except where formal agreements are in place.

## **Section 10: Home Unit/Agency Responsibilities for use of RPL**

1. The home unit/agency is responsible for providing potential candidates with information about the credentialing process. This should include NWCG positions where RPL is a valid credentialing process for a specific position.
2. The home unit/agency will brief potential candidates about the RPL process, what it is, what support is available, and competency related information.
3. The home unit/agency will determine if the required subject matter expertise is available to staff an Assessment Panel, and at minimum, one member of the evaluation team is currently qualified in the NWCG position being evaluated.
4. The home unit/agency is responsible to establish an RPL process with policy and procedures based on NWCG minimum standards for NWCG position qualifications.
5. The home unit/agency is responsible for ensuring the RPL process is conducted according to accepted NWCG standards for qualification in NWCG positions.

## **Section 11: Initiating the Use of RPL in the Credentialing Process**

1. The RPL process should begin with the candidate and the home unit/agency discussing the NWCG IPD for a particular qualification to determine if the candidate has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the duties of the desired position.
2. Based on the preliminary discussions with the candidate, the home unit/agency will decide if RPL is the best tool for the credentialing process. Factors for consideration should include the candidate's experiences, availability of subject matter experts experienced in RPL, and the cost of hosting an Assessment Panel versus an alternate credentialing process.
3. Once the home unit/agency is satisfied that RPL is a good fit for the candidate, the home unit/agency should guide the candidate through the RPL process in accordance with its policy and procedures.

## **Section 12: Application for the use of RPL in Credentialing**

1. The candidate should develop a Self-Assessment and Portfolio Worksheet in accordance with home unit/agency's policies and procedures, which will serve as the application for the candidate's entry into the RPL credentialing process. The Self-Assessment is an evaluation performed by candidates documenting knowledge, skills, and abilities that demonstrate their competence in a specific position. This requires the applicant to systematically detail the experiences and learning that he or she believes match the position competencies.
2. The home unit/agency is responsible for mentoring and guiding the candidate through the self-assessment and portfolio development phases. This should provide information to the candidate about assessments in general as well as their assessment.
3. The candidate is required to compile and submit a professional portfolio with the self-assessment as part of the RPL application package to the established RPL Board. Candidates may base their RPL application on any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience, or general life experiences.

## **Section 13: Candidate's Portfolio**

1. A portfolio will be developed by the candidate that accurately reflects the experiences in meeting the competencies for the position. The portfolio is a collection of documentation supporting the candidate's claim of meeting the position competencies.
2. The responsibility for providing evidence documenting the candidate's knowledge and experience rests entirely with the candidate. All evidence must be sufficient to satisfy the evaluation panel of the candidate's competency to perform the desired position.
3. Documentation must be:
  - a. Valid and applicable to the position being assessed.
  - b. Current enough to demonstrate up-to-date competence.
  - c. Sufficient to clearly show competence.
  - d. Authentic and specific to the candidate. Original certificates should be available during the interview and not included as part of the portfolio.
4. The portfolio should include copies of documents that demonstrate the candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities relating to the position competencies.
5. Falsification or forgery of documents used in the RPL process will be grounds for dismissal from the certification process and may result in disciplinary action.

## **Section 14: Evaluation Panel**

1. The evaluation panel is composed of three or more subject matter experts assembled to assess the candidate's competency to perform the job.
2. The evaluators will review the candidate's documentation and materials, participate in an interview, and reach a consensus as to whether the candidate meets the minimum competency to perform in the position.
3. Upon recommendation of competency in a specific NWCG position, the evaluation panel will recommend competency in the position applied for by the candidate, as well as all prerequisite

positions as delineated in PMS 310-1, or identify prerequisite positions where the panel feels the candidate does not yet meet the competency.

4. The panel makes a recommendation as to the candidate's competency in the position. This recommendation is then forwarded to the home unit/agency for a final decision.

## **Section 15: Evaluator Qualifications**

1. At least one evaluator must be fully qualified and "current" in the position they are reviewing. Each evaluator should be well-versed in the duties and requirements of the position.
2. At least one member of the panel should possess a background in NWCG training and qualifications and be capable of preparing a Position Development Plan for the candidate.
3. An aptitude in interpersonal dynamics and listening skills will aid in becoming an effective evaluator.
4. All evaluators should attend RPL orientation training, developed and delivered by the home unit/agency.

## **Section 16: Evaluation Process**

1. Evaluating competence is the process of collecting evidence and making judgments about whether a candidate has achieved the minimum competencies expected for a specific position.
2. Competence means having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the duties of the position safely and correctly.
3. The evaluation process must be:
  - a. Fair, to not disadvantage any candidate.
  - b. Flexible, to give credit for all sources of learning and experience.
  - c. Valid and relevant in demonstrating the candidate meets the competency.
  - d. Reliable in providing consistent results.

## **Section 17: Assessing the Portfolio**

1. The evaluators will review the portfolio and compare it with the competencies for the position.
2. If the evaluators do not gain sufficient information to make a judgment about the candidate's competence, more evidence may be obtained during the interview.

## **Section 18: Evaluation Interview**

The interview may be the evaluator's most valuable tool in making a conclusion as to a candidate's competency.

1. An interview provides evaluators an opportunity to ensure they are satisfied with the quality of the evidence provided in the portfolio.
2. The interview with the candidate allows the evaluator to delve into the candidate's relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities.
3. Evaluators should use a combination of competency-based evaluation methods, such as:



- a. Evidence of prior learning,
- b. Interview questions,
- c. Direct observation,
- d. Simulations.

4. Evaluators should look for consistency in multiple categories of evidence.

Note: NWCG recommends the development of an RPL Evaluator's Handbook by the home unit/agency.

## **Section 19: Check References**

The evaluator should be prepared to check and verify references.

## **Section 20: Determination of Competency**

1. The panel has two choices, either "Competent" or "Not-Yet-Competent." A panel recommendation of "Competent" must be unanimous.
2. The panel's recommendation shall be noted on the RPL Evaluation Panel Recommendation Form included in the candidate's assessment form and forwarded to the home unit/agency.
3. If the recommendation is "Not-Yet-Competent," it will be noted on the RPL Evaluation Panel Recommendation Form, and the panel will complete the position development plan section of the RPL Assessment Form. Panel members should list areas where the candidate did not show sufficient knowledge, skills, or abilities to demonstrate competence in the desired position. The form has space for feedback to the candidate for further position career development.
4. Panel members should not discuss the results of the evaluation with the candidate.

Note: NWCG recommends development of a standard RPL Evaluation Recommendation and Assessment Form.

## **Section 21: Decision Process**

1. The home unit/agency is the final authority in awarding certification.
2. The home unit/agency has a responsibility to ensure that the entire evaluation process is conducted properly and fairly; and to either endorse the recommendations of the evaluation panel, make position development recommendations, or ask for further review of the candidate by the panel.
3. The home unit/agency has the authority to overrule a finding by the evaluation panel of "Competent," but does not have authority to overrule a finding of "Not-Yet-Competent."
4. The home unit/agency will make all results available to the candidate.

## **Section 22: Documentation**

1. The home unit/agency will establish guidelines on RPL documentation requirements.
2. As a minimum, the home unit/agency will document a candidate's application for RPL, the steps taken during the RPL process, and the position RPL Assessment Report.

## **Section 23: Appeal Process**

NWCG recommends development of an appeal process where candidates are afforded an appeal of the assessment if they believe it has not been conducted according to the established RPL process.

## **Section 24: Summary of Minimum Standards and Recommendations**

At minimum, agencies using this standard for development of an RPL process must meet the following:

1. NWCG terminology and the RPL process should align with overarching FEMA guidance.
2. Support interagency cooperation on approvals, RPL boards, and support for smaller agencies lacking sufficiently qualified staff.
3. RPL process for NWCG position qualification shall not circumvent or minimize course and training requirements for specific positions, as defined in the most current edition of PMS 310-1.
4. The home unit/agency is responsible to establish an RPL process with policy and procedures based on NWCG minimum standards for NWCG position qualifications. This may be in collaboration and cooperatively with partnering agencies, such as through a fire compact collaborative.
5. Agencies and evaluation panels shall ensure that candidates successfully meet competencies referred to in the duties and responsibilities outlined in the NWCG IPDs. These IPDs provide minimum standards required to perform in the position. The RPL evaluation panel should reference the NWCG IPD during the candidate evaluation process.
6. The RPL process must include a standardized candidate Self-Assessment Worksheet as part of the application process.
7. Provide an evaluation panel comprised of at least three or more subject matter experts, with at least one member who is currently qualified in the position being reviewed.
8. Home unit/agency has the authority to overrule a finding by the evaluation panel of “Competent,” however does not have authority to overrule a finding of “Not-Yet-Competent.”
9. Evaluation panel recommendations shall be noted on an RPL Evaluation Panel Recommendation Form included in the candidate’s Assessment Form and forwarded to the home unit/agency.
10. Establish and provide guidelines for documentation requirements and management to related documents.

### **NWCG Recommendations:**

- Development of an RPL Evaluators Handbook by the home unit/agency.
- Development of a standard RPL Evaluation Recommendation and Assessment Form.
- Development of an Appeals process where candidates are afforded an appeal of the assessment if they believe it has not been conducted according to the RPL established process.

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