



Date: January 26, 2026

To: National Committee Chairs

CC: Executive Committee, Dawson Hughes - CEO

From: Ed Coates - President

RE: Definitions for Rules, Policies, and Guidelines

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**Background:** USMS has a multitude of rules, regulations, policies, guidelines, and procedures. These have expanded organically over time. However, the process of implementing items outside of the rule book is not well defined and some items that are codified in the rule book may be better defined as policies or guidelines.

**What is Needed:**

1. Clear framework that reflects modern best practice that governs our activities at each level of management.
2. Consistent terminology throughout the organization with defined ownership, expectations for implementation and process for change.
3. Increased flexibility for the board of directors, committees, and staff to adapt policies and guidelines to meet evolving operational needs, while retaining appropriate oversight.

**What is Being Proposed:**

1. Agree and adopt a clear framework for what should be
  - a. RULES (in our rule book and controlled by HOD)
  - b. POLICIES (required/mandatory processes and procedures for our committees and management – must approved by the board but can be recommended by committees, staff, task forces, or other groups with relevant expertise)
  - c. GUIDELINES (recommended best practice, processes, and procedures agreed by committees, management and the BOD that can evolve flexibly without the need for HOD approval)
2. Seek committee input/concurrence on establishing these DEFINITIONS of RULES, POLICIES and GUIDELINES
3. When DEFINITIONS are agreed, work with committees to determine which matters belong in each category
4. Simplify RULE BOOK with approval of HOD to relocate any POLICIES and GUIDELINES that are currently in the RULE BOOK into policy and guideline documents and web pages.

**Timeline: 2026 and 2027**

1. January 2026: Committee Chairs are provided this framework for feedback.
2. February 15, 2026: Committee feedback due to the board for consideration at Winter Meetings
3. Spring 2026:
  - a. Committees Review
    - i. Relevant committee operating guidelines and polices (all of which should be listed on each committee page on [usms.org](http://usms.org)) to determine if realignment with new definitions is needed and to consider necessary updates.



- ii. Relevant areas of rule book (legislation, rules, long distance, board, governance) to determine what areas might be better served as policy or guideline based on new definitions.
  - b. Submit preliminary suggestions to relevant VP for board consideration and input.
    - i. Include suggested time frame for change (e.g., by 2026 or 2027 annual meeting).
  - c. Fall 2026: Complete edits and adjustments identified for 2026
  - d. 2027: Begin work on identified 2027 adjustment for completion by the 2027 annual meeting.
4. Going forward: Changes or updates to policies or guidelines will continue to be reported in committee and board meeting minutes throughout the year and a summary of significant updates will be included in their reports to the annual meeting.

### **Details (Summarized in Attached Chart)**

Throughout USMS's history, the USMS Code of Regulations and Rules of Competition (i.e., the Rule Book) has been the guiding document for organizational bylaws, rules of competition, business practices, event operations, policies, standards, and guidelines. During that history, committees, including the Board of Directors, sometimes met as little as once a year (at the annual meeting). national communication was limited to occasional phone calls and mail and then grew into monthly conference calls of national committees and the board. This singular document served USMS during a time prior to the internet and the professional staff at the National Office.

The growth and evolution of USMS combined with technological advancements and the addition of professional staff, have increased the pace of USMS activities and services exponentially. These guidelines include how the information will be disseminated, which stakeholder groups are accountable, and what is required to make changes. These guidelines are intended to more accurately define management duties that are the responsibility of the professional staff and the governance and oversight roles of the Board of Directors, national committees, and House of Delegates.

### **Rules and Regulations:**

General Definition – Most nonprofits have bylaws and policies that would be the “rules and regulations” of the organization. The all-inclusive USMS rule book that combines everything from bylaws to rules of competition to code of conduct to meet operating guidelines, serves a decentralized structure required prior to modern communication tools and the addition of a National Office staff (The rule book was designed for a paper and post-office system.)

USMS Definition – **Mandatory** rules and regulations of competition and procedures that protect the organization and its members. Changes to these rules would follow the current amendment procedure laid out in the USMS rule book and require a vote of the House of Delegates.

Examples: Rules and regulations of competitions, liability release requirements, code of conduct, etc.



## Policy:

General Definition: Mandatory (unless committee approves waiving the requirement) - General written document that establishes a standard by which the institution manages its affairs. Changes in policy have a lower threshold and less stringent process than rules or bylaws.

USMS Definition: **Mandatory** processes and procedures that require oversight from a specialized committee or staff but do not require HOD approval. Policy can be established or changed by vote of oversight committee with approval of the board (e.g., financial policies and other [examples](#)). Policies and procedures require oversight from a specific committee or staff to ensure accountability through proper oversight while giving us the ability to adapt our processes as better and more efficient tools are available. In the event of a conflict between a stated policy and the USMS Rules and Regulations, the provisions of the rule book shall prevail.

[Examples](#): Financial policies, business operations, organizational policies, etc.

## Guideline:

General Definition: Recommended/Optional. Give recommendations, interpretations, instructions, best practices, or frameworks in which to operate. Informal, not mandatory. Guidelines may change frequently.

USMS Definition: **Recommended** best practices, procedures, and processes established by a committee, the board, or staff. Operational guidelines would not require formal board approval, but concurrence with the board and other relevant committees, when applicable, is recommended. Operational guidance cannot create mandatory requirements. In the event of a conflict between operational guidelines and the USMS Rules and Regulations, the provisions of the rule book shall prevail.

Examples: [Swimwear exemption](#), guides to operations, [national qualifying times](#)