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WILDLAND FIRE AGENCIES AND FAA REMIND PUBLIC “IF YOU FLY, WE CAN’T”

BOISE, IDAHO – Federal, state, and local wildland fire management agencies and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) urge members of the public not to fly “Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)” or drones over or near wildfires. Unauthorized drone flights pose serious risks to firefighter and public safety and the effectiveness of wildfire suppression operations.

So far this year, there have been 17 documented instances of unauthorized drone flights over or near wildfires in nine states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Washington) that have resulted in aerial firefighting operations being temporarily shut down 14 times. In 2016, there were more than 40 documented instances of unauthorized drone flights over or near wildfires in 12 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming) that resulted in aerial firefighting operations being temporarily shut down more than 20 times.

If an unauthorized drone is detected flying over or near a wildfire, fire managers may have to ground all airtankers, helicopters, and other aerial firefighting aircraft until they can confirm that the drone has left the area and they feel confident that it won’t be coming back. This can cause wildfires to become larger and more costly and to unduly threaten lives, property, and valuable natural and cultural resources.

“Most members of the public would never dream of standing in front of a fire engine to stop it from getting to a wildfire, but that’s essentially what they’re doing to aerial firefighting aircraft when they fly a drone over or near a wildfire,” said Dan Buckley, Chair of the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

Aerial firefighting aircraft, such as airtankers and helicopters, fly at very low altitudes,
typically just a couple of hundred feet above the ground and in the same airspace as drones flown by the public. This creates the potential for a mid-air collision, or a pilot distraction that results in a crash, that could seriously injure or kill aerial and/or ground firefighters.

Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFRs) typically put in place during wildfires require manned or unmanned aircraft not involved in wildfire suppression operations to obtain permission to enter specified airspace. The FAA, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of the Interior and other wildland fire management agencies consider drones, including those flown by the public for fun, to be aircraft and therefore subject to TFRs. Members of the public should not fly drones over or near wildfires even if a TFR is not in place because of the potential for accidents and disruption of suppression operations. Individuals who are determined to have interfered with wildfire suppression efforts may be subject to civil penalties of up to $20,000 and potentially criminal prosecution. At least one person has been arrested this year in connection with flying an unauthorized drone over the Goodwin Fire in Arizona. Members of the public who have witnessed, or who have information about an unauthorized drone flight over or near a wildfire, should contact local law enforcement.

The U.S. Department of the Interior, in partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies, has developed a wildfire location data-sharing program called “Current Wildland Fires” to inform drone pilots of areas to avoid flying over or near. Additional information is available at https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-expands-information-sharing-initiative-prevent-drone-incursions

To keep drone pilots aware of flight restrictions, the FAA has developed an easy-to-use smartphone app called B4UFLY. The app helps drone pilots determine whether there are any restrictions or requirements in effect at the location where they want to fly. B4UFLY is available for free download in the App Store for iOS and Google Play store for Android. Additional information is available at https://www.faa.gov/uas/where_to_fly/b4ufly/

Wildland fire management agencies are also using a variety of communication tools to connect with drone pilots. The “If You Fly, We Can’t” safety awareness campaign is designed to keep drone pilots away from airspace used by firefighters. Additional information is available at https://www.nifc.gov/drones/index.html

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