



National Interagency Fire Center News

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AGENCIES REMIND PUBLIC “IF YOU FLY, WE CAN’T”

BOISE, IDAHO – Federal, state, and local wildland fire agencies and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) are reminding members of the public not to fly “Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)” or drones over or near wildfires this season. Unauthorized UAS flights can potentially cause serious accidents and disrupt aerial firefighting operations.

So far this year, there have been four reports of unauthorized drone flights over or near wildfires in the U.S. and Canada. In 2015, there were at least 20 documented instances of unauthorized drone flights over or near wildfires in California, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, Wyoming and Washington. Aerial firefighting operations in these states were temporarily shut down on at least twelve occasions and there were two cases of near misses with UAS aircraft.

Fire agencies and the FAA caution that aerial intrusions like these can unduly threaten lives, property, and valuable natural and cultural resources. UAS interference may also stop firefighting operations and cause wildfires to become larger and more costly.

“Firefighter and public safety are the top priority in wildfire management,” said Dan Buckley, Chair of the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. “If an unauthorized UAS is detected flying over or near a wildfire, we may have to ground all airtankers, helicopters, and other aerial firefighting aircraft until we can confirm that the UAS has left the area and we are confident it won’t be coming back, which could decrease the effectiveness of wildfire suppression operations.”

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 UAS aircraft flown by the public. This creates the potential for a mid-air collision 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 from fire managers to enter specified airspace. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of the Interior and other wildland fire management agencies consider UAS, including those used by the public for hobby and recreation purposes, to be aircraft and therefore subject to TFRs. People should not fly UAS 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 \$25,000 and potentially criminal prosecution.

To keep UAS pilots aware of flight restrictions, the FAA has developed an easy-to-use smartphone app called B4UFLY. The app helps unmanned aircraft operators 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. The app is part of the “*Know Before You Fly*” campaign aimed at UAS hobbyists. For more information. See: www.faa.gov/uas/model_aircraft/.

Wildland fire agencies are also using a variety of communication tools to connect with UAS pilots. The “*If You Fly, We Can’t*” UAS safety awareness campaign, launched last summer, is designed to keep UAS pilots away from airspace used by firefighters. See: www.fs.fed.us/fire/aviation/uas.html

If the public has witnessed or has information about a safety-related UAS event, please contact local law enforcement.

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