



## Drone Intrusions and Wildland Fire Airspace

One issue that has really taken off this fire season is what the National Interagency Fire Center calls “drone intrusions.”

“Drone intrusions” happen when a hobby drone is flown into the airspace over and around an active wildfire. Obviously, drone intrusions are a big deal to firefighting pilots. Much of the flying done to fight forest and rangeland fires occurs at relatively low altitudes—as close as 150 feet above ground level. Retardant drops, recon flights, crew shuttles and supply deliveries all are flown at times relatively close to the ground.

Drones, which are called unmanned aircraft systems in federal parlance, are small, slow and hard to see; they have no communication with other aircraft over and around a fire; and they are not equipped to “sense and avoid” other aircraft. Because many drone operators have outfitted their aircraft with small video cameras, they tend to fly their drones right into the thick of things—where the fire is active. Unfortunately, these are the same areas where fire aircraft are working. To use the old cliché, it’s a recipe for disaster.

Firefighting pilots are unanimous: sooner or later somebody is going to inadvertently fly his or her drone into the path of an airplane or helicopter near a large fire. Drones have already been reported to have flown a mere 200 feet off the wing of a recon airplane. In another case, a drone was witnessed to have flown between two firefighting aircraft. Even under a best-case scenario, the outcome of a drone collision with a firefighting aircraft will be bad.

The numbers support this opinion. Drones are extremely popular among hobbyists. One aviation industry analyst estimates that about half a million drones are privately owned in the U.S. Drone intrusions seem to be the most frequent around wildland-urban interface fires. Eight out of the 12 drone intrusion incidents documented this year have occurred in California, especially in areas around Los Angeles.

What can be done about this problem? First off, whenever fire officials see or hear of a drone in the vicinity of a fire, they immediately shut down the air operation over the fire. Air ops do not resume until the drone intrusion is confirmed to be over.

Second, the wildland fire agencies are trying to spread the word to the public: Please keep drones away from wildfires! We understand that fires are interesting and make for awesome video. But shooting a few minutes of cool video is not worth the lives of firefighting aircrews doing their jobs.

Finally, the fire agencies are working with the aviation industry and the Federal Aviation Administration to create a stronger regulatory and information framework to communicate how serious the drone intrusion problem is.

To our knowledge, no one has been killed or injured because of a drone intrusion. Let’s keep it that way. Help out by spreading the word: drones and wildfires don’t mix.

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Partners at NIFC launched a campaign to keep drones away from wildfires.



Road Trip  
to  
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