

Unauthorized Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Flights Over or Near Wildfires

\*So far this year there have been at least (#) documented instances of individuals and organizations flying UAS without authorization over or near wildfires that has resulted in aerial firefighting operations being temporarily shut down on at least (#) occasions (see 2018 UAS Incursions graphic at <https://www.nifc.gov/drones/outreach.html> for current numbers and locations).

\*In 2017, there were at least 38 documented instances of members of the public and others flying UAS, also known as “drones,” without authorization over or near wildfires in 12 states (Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming). This resulted in aerial firefighting operations being temporarily shut down on at least 26 occasions, which may have caused wildfires to grow larger and unduly threaten lives, property, and valuable natural and cultural resources.

\*In 2016, there were more than 40 documented instances of members of the public and others flying UAS without authorization 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 on more than 20 occasions.

\*In 2015, there were at least 21 documented instances of members of the public and others flying UAS without authorization over or near wildfires in five western states (California, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) that resulted in aerial firefighting operations being temporarily shut down on at least ten occasions.

\*There is no centralized national mechanism to report unauthorized UAS flights over wildfires, so these are only the incidents that wildfire management agencies have become aware of, there are likely more that are not known about.

\*Firefighter and public safety are the top priorities in wildfire management. Unauthorized UAS flights over or near a wildfire could cause serious injury or death to firefighters in the air and/or firefighters and members of the public on the ground.

\*Firefighting aircraft – such as air attack aircraft, lead planes, Airtankers, and helicopters - typically fly in smoky, windy, and turbulent conditions. Safety depends on knowing what other aircraft are operating in the airspace and where they are at all times. This is compromised by the presence of unauthorized UAS.

\*Firefighting aircraft fly at very low altitudes, typically just a couple of hundred feet above the ground, the same as UAS flown by members of the public and others do. This creates the potential for a mid-air collision or pilot distraction that could result in a serious or fatal accident.

\*In addition, an unauthorized UAS that loses its communication link could fall from the sky, causing serious injuries or deaths of firefighters or members of the public on the ground.

\*The bottom line is that “If you fly, we can’t.” Unauthorized UAS flights could lead fire managers to suspend aerial wildfire suppression operations – such as Airtankers dropping fire retardant and helicopters dropping water - until the UAS has left the airspace and they are confident it won’t return.

\*Suspending air operations could decrease the effectiveness of wildfire suppression operations, allowing wildfires to grow larger, and in some cases, unduly threaten lives, property, and valuable natural and cultural resources. The effects of lost aircraft time could be compounded by flames moving into untreated terrain.

\*Suspended air operations can also delay transportation of firefighters to different locations and add to wildfire suppression costs.

\*The USDA Forest Service, and other federal, state, and local agencies have been working diligently for several years to educate the public about the dangers associated with flying UAS over or near wildfires. Educational efforts include the “If You Fly, We Can’t” campaign and the Tread Lightly “Respected Access” campaign <https://www.treadlightly.org/recreation_tips/drones/>

\*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>

\*Individuals who fly UAS without authorization over wildfires may be violating federal, state, and/or local laws, regulations, and ordinances, whether a Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR) is in place or not. All unauthorized UAS flights over wildfires on National Forest System lands will be reported to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and law enforcement agencies. 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.