

Opinion: Drones can be deadly to firefighters

By Robert Westover

Imagine if a hostile country sent an Unmanned Aircraft System or UAS, otherwise known as a drone, to disturb the efforts of firefighters during a catastrophic wildfire. The confusion that might ensue could cause loss of life and property as flames jump fire lines simply because resources have been diverted or grounded to identify and remove the UAS. But these threats aren't coming from an enemy state. They are being flown by our own citizens and impeding the job of our firefighters. This isn't a script for a Hollywood film. It's really happening.

Recently, unauthorized drones disrupted wildfire operations in southern California twice in one week. Because of these drones, air tanker operations were suspended on both the Sterling Fire and Lake Fire on the San Bernardino National Forest.

"If a UAS is detected flying over or near a wildfire, we will stop air tankers from dropping fire retardant, helicopters from dropping water and other aerial firefighting aircraft from performing wildfire suppression missions until we can confirm that the drone has left the area and we are confident it won't return," said Steve Gage, U.S. Forest Service representative on the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

Firefighting aircraft, such as air tankers and helicopters, fly at very low altitudes, typically just a couple of hundred feet above the ground, the same as drones flown by members of the public. This creates the potential for a mid-air collision that could seriously injure or kill aerial or ground

firefighters. In addition, if a drone loses its communication link it could fall from the sky, causing serious injuries or deaths of firefighters on the ground.

Temporary flight restrictions or TFRs are typically put in place during wildfires that require aircraft, manned or unmanned, that are not involved in wildfire suppression operations to obtain permission from fire managers to enter specified airspace.

The FAA, Forest Service, Department of the Interior and other wildland fire management agencies consider drones, including those used by members of the public for hobby and recreation purposes, 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 to prevent accidents and disruption of suppression operations. Those determined to have interfered with wildfire suppression efforts may be subject to civil penalties and potentially criminal prosecution. For guidance to those flying drones for hobby or recreation purposes, go online.

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