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Coalition Urges: Ground Your Drone Near Fires

Small UAVs can be a helpful tool to combat fires – but only if used in coordination with the proper authorities

WASHINGTON, DC – AUGUST 5, 2015 – Small UAVs, or drones, can be a helpful tool to assist with firefighting and rescue missions. Local fire departments in states like Connecticut, Maryland, and Ohio and even California are exploring how the real-time information drones provide can reduce risks to firefighters and first responders more broadly. For example, drones can point crews to the exact location of fires, provide details about structural damage to buildings, and help map the trajectory of fires. In urban areas, drones can be used to find persons trapped in the upper floors of tall buildings. In many cases, drones are safer and less expensive to operate than manned aircraft like helicopters.

Nevertheless, the Small UAV Coalition recognizes that reckless and bad operators do exist, and believes that those who endanger first responders should be prosecuted under existing laws. Due to the wildfires in California, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) recently issued temporary flight restrictions in the areas of North Fork, Palomar, and Grass Valley, California. Reports of unauthorized drone operations in these areas are troubling, as these flights are not coordinated with the fire departments, risk collision with manned aircraft, and have already delayed efforts to put out the fires.

Michael Drobac, Executive Director of the Coalition said: "While we must be good stewards of this technology, we also hope lawmakers will resist the urge to write redundant and often contradictory laws that will prevent Americans from realizing its many benefits."

The Coalition also notes that several of its members offer solutions to prevent drones from unintentionally entering restricted airspace, including airspace restricted temporarily during forest fires. For example, Airmap's airspace information map, which is freely available to consumers on the web today, notifies users of temporary flight restrictions (including wildfires), airport airspace information, and other cautionary layers like power plants, heliports, and schools. Skyward's cloud-based service connects drone operators to the tools they need to fly with confidence: a real time air chart of where they can fly, flight planning and logging, and personnel and fleet management. Verifly partners with pilots, manufacturers, regulators, insurers and privacy advocates to develop built-in compliance technology, such as flight and activity restrictions and a global identification registry. Finally, in the future, unmanned traffic management systems (UTMs) will increase coordination and reduce risk of collision or interference with public sector emergency manned operations.

Drone operators should at all times obey the FAA's guidance, and more importantly, should use common sense about where and when to fly. We point operators to the literature created by the Know Before You Fly campaign, which can be found at http://knowbeforeyoufly.org/facts/.

For more information on the Small UAV Coalition and its members, please visit www.smalluavcoalition.org, contact press@smalluavcoalition.org, or follow @smallUAVs on Twitter.

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