



Federal Aviation
Administration



DRONES & WILDFIRES

DIGITAL TOOLKIT

Drones and Wildfires **are a Toxic Mix**



If You Fly, Firefighters Can't

Flying a drone near a wildfire is dangerous and can cost lives. When people fly drones near wildfires, fire response agencies often ground their aircraft to avoid the potential for a midair collision. Delaying airborne response poses a threat to firefighters on the ground, residents and property in nearby communities, and it can allow wildfires to grow larger. Sadly, these incidents occur on a regular basis. In recent years, there have been *more than 100 documented cases* of unauthorized drones flying near wildfires. Your photos and video footage of the wildfires are not worth the lives and crucial operations they jeopardize. *The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC)* says it best: If You Fly, We Can't.



Know the Rules

The FAA often implements [Temporary Flight Restrictions \(TFRs\)](#) around wildfires to protect aircraft that are involved in the firefighting operation. All aircraft, including drones, are prohibited from flying in the restricted area unless they're operated by an agency that's involved in the firefighting operation. Even if a TFR is not in place, drone pilots should avoid flying near wildfires. It's a federal crime to interfere with firefighting aircraft regardless of whether restrictions are established, and violators can face stiff penalties.



Penalties

It's a *federal crime*, punishable by up to 12 months in prison, to interfere with firefighting efforts on public lands. Additionally, Congress has authorized the FAA to *impose a civil penalty of up to \$20,000* against any drone pilot who interferes with wildfire suppression, law enforcement or emergency response operations. The FAA treats these violations seriously, and will immediately consider swift enforcement action for these offenses.



The FAA's **ROLE**

Stay Up-To-Date: The FAA continually publishes drone-safety educational information at faa.gov/uas and aggressively promotes the latest information through our *social media platforms*.

- We work closely with our safety partners to get the word out about the dangers of flying drones near wildfires. Our partners include *NIFC*, the *US Forest Service*, *Know Before You Fly* and *CALFIRE*.
- The FAA can take enforcement action against any drone pilot who interferes with firefighting operations.



Q: Why is it so dangerous to fly a drone near a wildfire?

A: *The US Forest Service states:* Firefighting aircraft fly at very low altitudes, typically just a couple of hundred feet above the ground, the same altitude as drones flown by members of the public and others. 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. 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.

Q: What should I do if I see someone operating a drone near a wildfire?

A: Report it immediately to local law enforcement and the nearest *FAA Flight Standards District Office* with as much information as possible.



Q & A (continued)

Q: How can first responders apply for a waiver to operate drones in emergency situations?

A: The FAA has a **special process to expedite approvals** in these situations. You must be an existing Part 107 Remote Pilot or have an existing Public COA to apply.

Q: I'm a member of the media and I want to get authorization to fly a drone near a wildfire. What can I do?

A: Media should avoid flying near wildfires, and never interfere with aviation operations or firefighting missions. **To qualify for the special approval process**, the operation(s) must directly support a response, relief, or recovery activity benefiting a critical public good. You must be an existing Part 107 Remote Pilot, and have the support of the on-scene commander on the ground **before** you submit your application. Upon approval, you must work with the on-scene commander/authority on the ground at all times, and never interfere with aviation operations or firefighting missions.



SHAREABLE CONTENT

- FAA SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES     
- National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) PSAs: www.nifc.gov/drones/outreach.html
- Calfire PSA: www.youtube.com/watch?v=069w2Cf5eUQ
- NIFC Videos



Resources

NIFC: www.nifc.gov/drones/

US Forest Service: www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/fire/uas/if-you-fly

Know Before You Fly: www.knowbeforeyoufly.org/uasandwildfires/