

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND FORESTRY

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Drones interfere with wildfire suppression efforts

As wildfire weather conditions are intensifying, Oklahoma Forestry Services is advising operators of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), also known as drones, to avoid flying near or over wildfires and putting fire suppression aircraft at risk.

“Drone operators need to understand that when they are detected near a fire, the aircraft being used to suppress fire has to be diverted away from the area,” said George Geissler, Oklahoma State Forester. “Drones pose a threat to these low flying aircraft and their pilots, and increase the risk of lives and property loss on the ground.”

Due to wildfire conditions, Oklahoma Forestry Services currently has federal and Oklahoma Air National Guard aircraft, including single engine air tankers (SEATs), the CL-415 “Super Scooper”, and helicopters directly assigned to wildland fire suppression in the state. These aircraft fly low to the ground while dropping their loads of water and retardant, sometimes well below 200 feet. Drones can fly up to 400 feet, which allows for the potential of a plane colliding with a drone and causing potentially catastrophic damage to the plane. Because of the potential for collision, fire suppression aircraft are diverted away from fires if a drone is detected in the area.

The issue is not limited to Oklahoma. There were dozens of instances during the 2015 western US fire season where tankers were prevented from working fires due to drones in the area. However, Oklahoma has seen three instances in the last five months in which drones were detected at wildfires. Drone use is rapidly increasing as the technology becomes more widely available and less expensive.

“Unmanned aerial systems have a wide variety of uses, many of which are only beginning to be explored,” said Oklahoma Secretary of Science and Technology Stephen McKeever. “Currently drone use during wildland fire suppression is not advisable due to potential conflict with helicopters and tankers activity fighting the fires. We must always consider the safety of our firefighters and the public first.”

Since there are so many people operating drones who have little or no aviation experience, Oklahoma Forestry Services hopes to work with others across the state and nation to educate operators about the dangers associated with flying around wildfires.

(MORE)

Oklahoma Forestry Services is the state's lead agency related to wildland fire prevention, protection and use. For additional information about wildfires, visit www.forestry.ok.gov/wildfire-information.

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Note to Media:

For the latest Oklahoma "Daily Wildfire Situation Report" visit www.forestry.ok.gov and click the link on the homepage (green box on right hand side.) The report contains information about recent fire activity, predicted fire weather and a link for current burn bans.

About Oklahoma Forestry Services

Oklahoma Forestry Services, a division of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, is committed to conserving, enhancing and protecting Oklahoma's 12.5 million acres of forests and woodlands. Since 1925, Oklahoma Forestry Services has worked with individuals and communities throughout the state to create resilient landscapes, fire-adaptive communities and provide wildfire response. Headquartered in Oklahoma City, the division also has regional offices in Goldsby, Broken Bow, Wilburton and Tahlequah. For more information, visit <http://www.forestry.ok.gov>.