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# News Release

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## Hobbyists flying drones impact Pinal Fire aviation operations

**PHOENIX, May 25, 2017 - For Immediate Release.** Four separate incidents involving hobbyists flying drones are hindering operations on the Pinal Fire since it was detected May 8, 2017. The fire, which is located in the Tonto National Forest Globe Ranger District near Globe, Arizona, has burned approximately 4,375 acres.

The latest drone sighting occurred May 24, 2017. An air tanker flying over the fire was forced to release its retardant at a higher altitude for safety reasons. The higher drop reduced the retardant's effectiveness on the fire. Subsequently, aviation operations were suspended until the drone issue was resolved.

On May 20, 2017, a law enforcement officer cited a hobbyist for flying a drone near the Pinal Fire.

Forest Service officials continue to emphasize that flying drones over or in close proximity to wildfires is illegal, endangers aviators as well as crews on the ground, and slows operations which potentially could result in the fire increasing in size.

Deputy Forest Supervisor Tom Torres, Tonto National Forest, explained that flying a drone near a wildfire is, in fact, breaking the law.

“The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations -- 43 CFR 9212.1(f) – indicates that it is illegal to resist or interfere with the efforts of firefighter(s) to extinguish a fire,” Torres said. “Doing so can result in a significant fine and/or a mandatory court appearance.”

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Drone operators also need to be aware that the Forest Service generally requests a Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR) from the Federal Aviation Administration on all fires when the Forest

Service has aircraft responding. A TFR is a certain area of airspace where air travel is limited because of a temporary hazardous condition, such as a wildfire. The rules and regulations regarding which aircraft can enter a TFR can be found in 14 CFR 91.137(a)(2).

All unauthorized unmanned aircraft systems flights over wildfires on National Forest System lands will be reported to the FAA and law enforcement agencies. Drone operators determined to have endangered manned aircraft or people on the ground and/or interfered with wildfire suppression may be subject to civil penalties, including fines of up to \$25,000, and potentially criminal prosecution.

With regard to aerial firefighting operations, all authorized aircraft on an incident maintain radio communication with each other to safely coordinate their missions, but aerial firefighting flight crews have no way to communicate with drone operators.

“Additionally, aerial firefighting aircraft have no way to detect drones other than by seeing them, and visual detection is nearly impossible due to the small size of most drones,” Torres said. “These factors make a mid-air collision with an unauthorized drone a distinct possibility.”

In most situations, drones spotted near a wildfire result in firefighting aircraft landing due to safety concerns.

“This prolongs firefighting operations,” Torres said. “In many cases, wildfires become larger when aircraft are not able to drop fire retardant, water, monitor wildfires from above, or provide tactical information to firefighters.

“Homes and other values at risk could burn needlessly, firefighters or others could be injured, or worst of all, a fatal accident could occur,” Torres continued. “No amount of video or photos are worth the consequences. Bottom line: under no circumstances should the public fly drones over or near a wildfire.”