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### **Drones Slow Wildfire Response and Ground Firefighting Aircraft**

**STATEWIDE** – With the first of two primary Arkansas wildfire seasons upon us (Feb – April), officials at the Arkansas Forestry Commission (AFC) prepare for an increase in wildfire frequency across the state. In January, wildland firefighters were responding to a fire in Ashley County when it was reported that a drone (Unmanned Aircraft System) was flying over the wildfire parameter. Flying a drone near a wildfire creates a serious safety hazard for firefighters and stops the assistance of any firefighting aircraft.

Drones of any size can cause a serious or fatal accident if they collide with firefighting aircraft. Furthermore, pilots have no way to detect drones other than by seeing them. For those reasons - if drones are reported near an Arkansas wildfire, firefighting aircraft will be grounded or sent to a different location immediately. This can result in wildfires becoming larger and leaves firefighters and dozer operators on the ground with no option to use aerial water drops from aircraft as a suppression tool. Aerial water drops are used to cool flames for faster control by firefighters and/or to provide direct protection of homes and other structures.

“When drones fly, we cannot use firefighting aircraft as a resource to stop wildfires,” said State Forester Joe Fox. “Firefighters and pilots could be injured, flames could overtake homes and other structures, or worst of all, a fatal accident could occur. We ask that drone operators stay away from wildfire emergencies for the safety of everyone involved.”

AFC Law Enforcement Officers will prosecute any violation against firefighting aircraft from drones or other threats to the full extent of the law. According to Arkansas Statute 5-54-102, it is unlawful for a person to “knowingly obstruct, impair, or hinder the performance of any governmental function.”

The mission of the AFC is to protect Arkansas’s forests, and those who enjoy them, from wildland fire and natural hazards while promoting rural and urban forest health, stewardship, development, and conservation for all generations of Arkansans. To report a wildfire, call 1-800-468-8834. To report a prescribed burn, call 1-800-830-8015. For local wildfire conditions, visit [arkfireinfo.org](http://arkfireinfo.org).

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