Don't Bemoan the Drone

Yes, DOI can fly! But it takes training.

Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) are remotely piloted aircraft, broadly referred to in the popular press as drones. They can be useful for resource management activities, search and rescue, and law enforcement operations, and have been successfully used in national parks. However, up to now no park has actually completed the official procedures for a fully approved National Park Service mission. Official UAS missions require a two-person crew and an observer to pass a two-week flight training and receive a medical certification. Otherwise, employees who use UAS in the parks are operating outside the scope of their positions.

If approved by a superintendent, there is a "file and fly" Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in place with the Department of Interior (DOI) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). This MOA establishes a framework under which DOI Bureaus must operate to comply with FAA rules and procedures pertaining to small UAS use. The scope of small UAS operations under this MOA applies only to systems weighing 55 lbs or less, engaged in public aircraft operations below 400 ft, and limited to natural resource and scientific applications as well as Search and Rescue efforts. All other UAS operations, including wildland fire and law enforcement operations, must still comply with the FAA Certificate of Authorization application and approval process before flights can commence.

No. The public may not fly in America's national parks.

In August 2014, National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis signed a policy memorandum that directs superintendents nationwide to prohibit launching, landing, or operating unmanned aircraft on lands and waters administered by the National Park Service. "We embrace many activities in national parks because they enhance visitor experiences with the iconic natural, historic, and cultural landscapes in our care," Jarvis said. "However, we have serious concerns about the negative impact that flying unmanned aircraft is having in parks, so we are prohibiting their use until we can determine the most appropriate policy that will protect park resources and provide all visitors with a rich experience."

Amazing potential for good

With the rapid advancement of UAS technology, the interagency fire community appreciates the potential benefits of this technology for managing incidents and missions. If you are considering flight with a drone or have questions, please consult with your Unit Aviation Officer or the Regional/State aviation staff to assist in selecting the aircraft best suited for the mission, and information on the approval process.

Flying a "Raven" at Haleakalā National Park

Drones can save labor and access areas too dangerous for people. They can deliver medical supplies to injured hikers and help find lost visitors quickly. Resource managers can utilize drones to photograph project areas at high resolution and easily perform 3D modeling of structures and landcover. They can be used to capture samples of biological resources, and so much more. As this technology advances, we realize many potential applications for its use. The DOI and others are actively working to ensure the safe integration of this technology into our resource and incident management operations... and the sky is the limit.

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