



PRESSRELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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Local Firefighters Flying Drones at Night in Yosemite

Two members of the Menlo Park Fire District's UAS/Drone Team have been flying in Yosemite National Park since Saturday, August 19, 2017. They are working directly with the South Central Sierra Interagency Incident Management Team that is assigned to the "South Fork" Fire.

The fire started burning 9 days ago on August 13, 2017, and quickly threatened the small Community of Wawona, where 490 structures were initially endangered by the fast moving fire. A mandatory evacuation order was put in place and there was also concern for the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, one of the last remaining stands of Giant Sequoias in the Nation.

As of noon today, August 22, 2017, the fire was 17% contained and estimated to have burned 3,820 acres, 765 Firefighters are assigned to the incident, including 22 hand crews, seven Helicopters, 1 dozer and 20 fire engines.

Battalion Chief Tom Calvert and Captain Tony Eggimann, with the Menlo Park Fire District's UAS/Drone Team, arrived on Saturday afternoon and have flown Drone missions every night in support of firefighting operations.

Chief Todd McNeal, with the Interagency Management Team, assigned to the fire, said, "History was recorded during the South Fork Incident in Yosemite National Park with a first ever sanction, that authorized night flights of UAS/Drones in Yosemite, specifically utilizing the Menlo Fire's Drones equipped with thermal imagery to perform reconnaissance missions that confirm the status of containment lines and locations of spot fires or other potential threats."

The South Fork Incident has been burning in steep rugged terrain with difficult access for ground suppression resources, wind and smoke conditions have often precluded manned aircraft flight during the day.

Battalion Chief Tom Calvert, who manages the Fire District UAS/Drone Program said, "These conditions are precisely where the capabilities and technology of Drone platforms equipped

with thermal imaging cameras can provide invaluable information to the incident management team and the firefighter's on the fire line in nearly real time. The benefits of reduced firefighter exposure to fire weakened trees, rolling rocks, intense fire behavior and limited rugged access are irrefutable and directly contribute to better situational awareness, timely decision making and proper allocation of limited suppression resources.”

Chief McNeal followed, “The bottom line is UAS/Drone platforms with thermal imaging capabilities combined with appropriate mission planning, air space management and the benefits of increased situational awareness will greatly improve operational effectiveness and the safety of all personnel by directly assisting those of us who are responsible for managing risk and extinguishment of this wildland fire.”

About the Menlo Park Fire District:

The Menlo Park Fire District provides essential fire and emergency services to the Town of Atherton, Cities of East Palo Alto and Menlo Park, Unincorporated areas of San Mateo County and on contract to the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory.

The Fire District is strategically located in the heart of Silicon Valley and has been developing and growing its UAS/Drone Program since 2014. Earlier this year it was identified by BARD Colleges Drone Program as one of just over 350 Public Safety Agencies Nationally with a program authorized and in compliance with FAA regulations.

In June, the Fire District held a one day UAS/Drone Symposium at SLAC to promote the responsible and progressive way other Fire Agencies could start or advance a legitimate Drone Program. Over 50 other Fire Agencies and over 200 people attended.

The Fire District recently acquired its night time and over crowd operations authorizations from the FAA and is only one of a few public safety agencies nationwide that now legitimately fly Drones at night.

Turning the corner and changing the perception of using Drones on Wildfires:

Menlo Park Fire District Chief Harold Schapelhouman said, "In recent years, Drones operated by uninformed or misguided civilians have acquired a terrible reputation, inside and outside the Fire Service, because they can compromise normal firefighting air operations needed to support, control and suppress a wildland fire. We see this first ever opportunity to not only use a Drone to support, help and assist firefighting operations, but to also do it at night when aircraft can't fly and fire activity can be difficult to monitor. That has proven to be very helpful on this incident, especially if it assists the management team and helps firefighters see Drones as tools, and not just as an unwanted distraction or a life safety and operational concern or problem.”

What are they flying and why:

The UAS/Drone Team is using three platforms, a DJI Inspire 1, Inspire 2 and Mavic Drones. The goal is to protect the community of Wawona and help save and preserve the forest and land within Yosemite National Park. - - - END