

# Small drones causing big problems for firefighting planes

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.31.15

Word Count **834**



A helicopter works to put out a fire near Oak Hills, California, in July 2015. James Quigg/The Victor Valley Daily Press via AP, File

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — As Jason Thrasher set down his firefighting helicopter, he saw what he thought was another helicopter battling the blaze.

Thrasher suddenly identified the object as a drone only 10 feet from his windshield. The unmanned aircraft forced him to make a hard left to avoid a collision, according to a report he filed the next day.

"If that drone came through my windshield, I have no idea what could have happened," Thrasher said. "If that drone hits my tail rotor, for sure it's going to be catastrophic."

The near-miss last September in Nevada City, California, explains why drones have quickly become a serious concern for firefighting pilots and other first responders, like police officers. The problems have led to calls for more rules and self-policing in the skies.

## Drone Incidents Up From 4 Last Year To 13 This Year

The U.S. Forest Service has counted 13 wildfires in which suspected drones, also called unmanned aerial vehicles, interfered with firefighting aircraft this year. There have been 11 since late June. Drones got in the way of only four fires last year. Last month, five drones flying over a wildfire grounded crews for 20 minutes as flames spread.

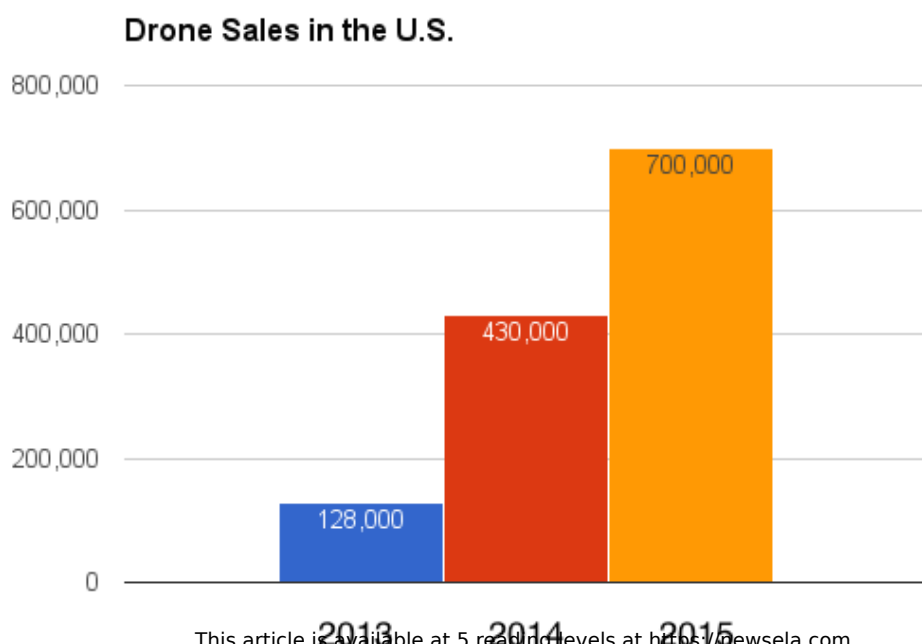
Firefighting agencies have introduced public service announcements to warn drone owners. Meanwhile, lawmakers are seeking stronger laws for owners who get in the way of firefighting.

"When you can't support firefighters on the ground, fires get bigger," said Ken Pimlott, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "It's significant, and it's a huge issue."

On Aug. 2, for the second time in three days, an airline pilot reported a drone while approaching John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City, New York. On Aug. 9, four airplanes spotted a drone while landing at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey. On Aug. 4, flames burned a Vietnamese restaurant in San Diego. The Fire Department pleaded with drone operators to leave the area. They tweeted, "You are interfering with fire operations."

## Lower Costs Mean More People Buying, Flying

There is a simple explanation for the growing number of sightings. Drones are getting cheaper and so more people are buying them. The Consumer Electronics Association predicts sales in the United States will reach 700,000 this year. About 430,000 drones were bought last year and 128,000 in 2013. The group estimates this year's average price for a drone is \$149, down from \$160 last year and \$349 in 2013.



Last month, 20 members of Congress from California had a request for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). They asked it to require drone makers to include technology that prevents operators from interfering with firefighters. One bill in the California Legislature would raise fines and give jail time for anyone who gets in the way. Another would let first responders destroy interfering drones without penalty.

Greg McNeal is a Pepperdine University law professor. He said that worries about drones are like the concerns about people taking cellphone pictures in locker rooms and other public places. Governments are figuring out how to control a new consumer technology that can create chaos when misused, he said.

Most drone operators who flew near wildfires were probably unaware of the dangers, said McNeal. Others are "straight reckless," he said. Drones usually carry cameras, and operators perhaps wanted to get pictures of wildfires in order to sell them.

### **Drones May Have Been Spotted At Wildfires In 5 States**

The U.S. Forest Service reported possible drone sightings this year in eight wildfires in California. There were also two in Washington state and one each were in Colorado, Minnesota and Utah.

On June 24 in San Bernardino, California, a plane trying to put out a fire came within about 500 feet of a drone. Another pilot soon came within the same distance of a second drone, and four firefighting aircraft were grounded for 2 1/2 hours.

In Washington state, an airplane flying over a forest fire spotted a drone on July 11. Pat McCabe, a U.S. Forest Service supervisor seated next to the pilot, saw the drone land about 3 miles from the fire. It was loaded into an SUV, whose driver sped away.

"The intelligence gathering stopped, and now our focus was on the drone," said McCabe.

### **Sightings Force Pilots To Land**

In Milford, California, on June 29, a drone appeared about 200 feet from the left wing of an airplane. The firefighter pilot was ordered to return to base.

Under FAA guidelines, drone operators should fly no higher than 400 feet. They should also stay clear of stadiums and people, and avoid flying within 5 miles of airports. During wildfires and other emergencies, the FAA will not allow drones to fly.

The prospect of public shaming may be the best deterrent, said Jon Resnick. He is a spokesman for SZ DJI Technology Co., one of the largest consumer drone makers.

"Technology can only do so much," he said. "At a certain point, common sense needs to take hold."

**Quiz**

- 1 Which statement BEST expresses the article's central idea?
- (A) As people buy more drones, firefighting aircraft are experiencing dangerous interference by drones.
  - (B) As people buy more drones, the need for proper training is becoming clearer.
  - (C) Though drones are becoming more popular, the laws about them are not keeping up.
  - (D) Though drones are becoming more popular, they have little use in public service such as fighting fires.
- 2 Which of these sentences is LEAST appropriate to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) The problems have led to calls for more rules and self-policing in the skies.
  - (B) Drones are getting cheaper and so more people are buying them.
  - (C) "Technology can only do so much," he said. "At a certain point, common sense needs to take hold."
  - (D) The U.S. Forest Service has counted 13 wildfires in which suspected drones, also called unmanned aerial vehicles, interfered with firefighting aircraft this year.

- 3 Read this sentence from the article.

*The Consumer Electronics Association predicts sales in the United States will reach 700,000 this year. About 430,000 drones were bought last year and 128,000 in 2013.*

Look at the graph. What information does the graph contain that the sentence DOES NOT?

- (A) the number of sales in 2015
- (B) the year when 800,000 drones will be sold
- (C) the country where the drones were purchased
- (D) the sentence contains the same information as the graph

4 Read this sentence below.

*The group estimates this year's average price for a drone is \$149, down from \$160 last year and \$349 in 2013.*

Use the information in the sentence above and the graph to compare the price of a drone to the number of drones sold.

- (A) As the price of drones increases, drone sales also increase.
- (B) As the price of drones decreases, drone sales increase.
- (C) As the price of drones decreases, drone sales also decrease.
- (D) As the price of drones increases, drone sales decrease.

## Answer Key

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