

Drones a threat to firefighters

By Keith Ridler, AP

BOISE, Idaho – Drones flying over wildfires could lead to firefighter injuries and force retardant bombers to be called off, wildfire managers say.

At least three drones have flown within or near restricted airspace intended for wildfire fighting aircraft so far this year, the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise announced Friday. That's up from one incident last year.

"We're seeing an increase in people wanting to film from a distance with hobby aircraft," said spokesman Mike Ferris, noting wildfires are often buzzing with low-flying planes and helicopters. "If you had one of these would you fly it near an airport?"

In June, a drone was spotted at the Two Bulls Fire near Bend in central Oregon. Drones have also been spotted at a fire in Washington state that destroyed hundreds of homes, and another that went aloft at a Northern California wildfire.

"Anytime that that happens, folks working these fires are going to feel compromised and they're not going to want to fly until they're sure the airspace is safe to fly in," said Aitor Bidaburu, chair of the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group at the center. "We have enough hazards on the ground."

Managers said tankers trying to make drops to protect firefighters or homes might have to turn away if a drone is in the area.

The Federal Aviation Administration allows hobbyists to use model aircraft or small drones as long as they keep them away

from airports, fly them under 400 feet and keep the aircraft within sight of the remote-controlling operator at all times.

However, wildfires typically have temporary flight restrictions that extend up and out from the fire so helicopters and retardant aircraft can do drops without worrying about other aircraft. The restrictions include small drones.

“If they’re going to be flying these things, they need to educate themselves,” Ferris said.

Those seeking to fly drones near wildfires might be able to do so legally, but they would first need permission from wildfire managers. The center said individuals using drones that interfere with firefighting efforts could face civil penalties and criminal prosecution.

Center spokesman Randy Eardley said some state agencies fly drones over fires to find hotspots, but the operators are communicating with wildfire managers.

“The problem with these hobbyists and recreationists is we have no communication with them,” he said.