

July 9, 2020

The Honorable Steve Dickson
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20591

The Honorable Vicki Christiansen
Chief
United States Forest Service
201 14th St, SW
Washington, DC 20227

The Honorable William P. Pendley
Deputy Director
Bureau of Land Management
1849 C St, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Administrator Dickson, Chief Christiansen, and Deputy Director Pendley:

I write to you today to request an update on interagency efforts to inform the public about the dangers of flying Unmanned Aerial Systems (drones) near a wildfire. As you are well aware, any such drone incursion within this restricted airspace requires the grounding of all aerial firefighting tools. In fact, that is exactly what happened in my home state of Nevada last month, as multiple unauthorized drones forced fire crews to halt aerial operations for up to an hour, withholding valuable time and resources from suppression efforts to combat the Poeville Fire.¹ In response to this situation, as well as others that take place throughout the country, I am calling on you and your agencies to ensure that a robust safety and educational campaign is taking place, and expanded where possible, in order to prevent future interference. Unfortunately, the ability to track and catch those acting in an unsafe way is still a challenge. So, in addition, I would appreciate a review of drone safety regulations and enforcement protocols that are being implemented amongst your agencies to ensure that we are making progress toward a safer airspace for the brave individuals who are fighting our all-too-frequent wildfires

This is especially alarming when considering that both the threat of wildfire and incursions continue to grow. According to data from the Department of the Interior, roughly 60,000 wildfires have scorched approximately 6.7 million acres annually over the last ten years.² From those, there have been twenty-one reported drone incursions during wildfire operations in 2019 alone, resulting in ten occurrences in which aerial firefighting efforts were disrupted.³ This is why I recently introduced the bipartisan *Aerial Incursion Repercussion (AIR) Safety Act* (S. 3413) with Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT). Specifically, this legislation seeks to study the effects

¹ Hofmann, Bryan. "Fire Officials: Flying Drones Over Fires is Dangerous and Illegal." KTVN Channel 2 News. Last modified June 30, 2020. <https://www.ktvn.com/story/42312730/flying-drones-over-fires-is-dangerous-and-illegal>.

² Department of the Interior. "Interior Reduces Wildfire Risks on More Than 1.4 Million Acres of Federal Land in 2019." Last modified January 8, 2020. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-reduces-wildfire-risks-more-14-million-acres-federal-land-2019>.

³ <https://www.nifc.gov/drones/outreach.html>

of drone incursions on both wildfire suppression and costs, while evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of various actions to prevent drone incursions, such as educational campaigns and the seizure or destruction of drones. I urge you and your agencies to support this legislation, and to bolster your efforts to improve public awareness about the consequences of drones impeding the efforts of firefighters.

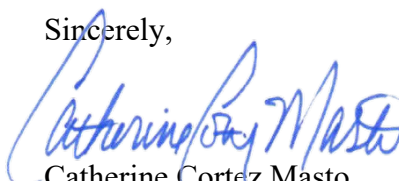
Furthermore, through the enactment of the *FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018* (P.L. 115-254), I worked to incorporate various provisions, including aspects of my *Safe DRONE Act* and the *Drone Safety Enhancement Act*, to increase the timeliness of drone safety regulations, authorize federal funding for the “Know Before You Fly” public awareness campaign, and require greater interagency coordination on drone safety. I cannot stress enough the need for federal agencies to make greater progress on the implementation of these provisions. By enhancing federal efforts to monitor and enforce unauthorized drones, we can better ensure the safety and well-being of the American public.

In an attempt to further understand the efforts your agencies are making, and the ways that Congress can help, please respond to the following:

- What efforts have been implemented in recent years to address this safety concern through interagency, regulatory, and educational efforts?
- How has the incorporation and implementation of additional authorities provided for in the 2018 FAA Reauthorization aided in these efforts?
- What additional authorities or resources do you need to provide for improved tracking and mitigation from civilian drone incursions, or enhanced safety for our vital wildfire responders?

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to receiving your response in a timely manner, as Congress should be taking expeditious action, where possible, on this important safety matter. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or have your staff contact Kyle Chapman in my office at Kyle_Chapman@cortezmasto.senate.gov.

Sincerely,


 Catherine Cortez Masto
 United States Senator