




C I T Y O F
RENO
Memorandum

DATE: August 22, 2025
TO: Mayor and City Council
THROUGH: Jackie Bryant, City Manager
FROM: David Cochran, Fire Chief
DEPT: Reno Fire Department
SUBJECT: Drone Interference with Wildfire Operations – Barron Fire Incident



Incident Overview

During the Barron Fire, a private drone was confirmed flying within the incident area. For safety reasons, all firefighting aircraft were immediately grounded, resulting in the termination of aerial suppression operations for the remainder of the fire. This incident highlights the serious risk drones pose to wildfire response efforts and the need for proactive prevention measures.

Legal Framework

- **Federal Regulations:**
 - The FAA regulates all airspace and routinely issues Temporary Flight Restrictions (TFRs) overactive wildfire incidents. Unauthorized drones are prohibited under these TFRs.
 - Federal criminal law makes reckless interference with wildfire suppression efforts a prosecutable offense.
- **Nevada Law:**
 - Nevada statutes (NRS Chapter's 475 & 493) prohibit obstructing firefighting operations.
 - These laws apply even when no TFR is in place.
 - See applicable NRS attached

- **Local Authority:**
 - While federal law preempts local airspace regulation, the City can:
 - Restrict drone launch/landing from City property.
 - Enforce state/local laws related to obstruction.
 - Lead proactive public communication campaigns to prevent violations.
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Need for Additional Laws

The FAA, federal criminal statutes, and Nevada law already provide a comprehensive legal framework. The City's most effective role is to focus on enforcement of existing rules and proactive public communication.

Recommended Communication & Operations Strategy

Objective: Prevent drone interference during fire incidents (structure or wildfire) by increasing public awareness and compliance related to the dangers of drone usage.

1. Fire Season Awareness – Annually in March and August

- Host a media availability to remind residents of the dangers of wildfires. Overall message will include talking points about avoiding the use of drones during active fire incidents (structure or wildfire). Key Message: *“If You Fly, We Can’t.”*
- Social media posts each month to remind residents that drone use is not permitted by the general public near active fire incidents (structure or wildfire).
- Provide messaging in both English and Spanish.

2. Red Flag Warnings – As needed per NOAA notifications

- Social media posts to make residents aware that a Red Flag Warning has been issued,
 - Highlight staffing efforts of RFD.
 - Identify actions for residents to avoid wildfire risks.
 - Remind residents to not fly drones near active fire incidents.

3. New Wildfire Start - City jurisdiction

- Immediate post to identify safety concerns:
 - Confirm incident location (identify and use hashtag if appropriate).
 - Identify closures, evacuations, and other relevant information.
 - Remind residents to avoid the area and let first responder's work.
 - Remind residents that drone use is prevented and impedes air response.

5. During Firefighting Operations

- Provide daily social reminders that drone use in proximity to the fire is illegal and impedes air response.

6. Post-Incident

- Post a public “thank you” acknowledging community cooperation and relevant wrap-up information.

Nevada Statutes Relevant to Drone Interference & Firefighting

NRS 475.070 — Interference with Emergency Personnel

Under this statute, any individual who, at the scene of a fire:

- Disobeys a lawful order of a firefighter or peace officer,
- Resists or otherwise interferes,
- Or engages in conduct likely to impede firefighting efforts,

is committing a misdemeanor. This provides direct legal grounds for action against drone operators who disrupt aerial suppression.

NRS 475.080 — Obstruction of Fire Extinguishment

This provision further criminalizes intentional prevention or obstruction of fire extinguishment operations, offering another enforceable base when drones effectively halt or delay emergency response to wildfires.

NRS 493.109 — UAV Restrictions Near Critical Facilities and Airports

Flying drones within 500 feet horizontally or 250 feet vertically of critical facilities—or within 5 miles of an airport—is prohibited unless expressly authorized. Violations are misdemeanors. This serves as a specific no-fly doctrine over key infrastructure and likely also covers wildfire zones staffed with emergency aircraft.

NRS 493.130 — Reckless or Dangerous UAV Operation

Operating any aircraft—including drones—in a careless or reckless manner that endangers life or property constitutes a gross misdemeanor. This general safety statute further empowers enforcement when drone flight behavior is hazardous, even absent a TFR.