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News Release

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Firefighters contain wildfire in Williams despite drone incursion

Williams, Ariz., June 18, 2017—For Immediate Release. Firefighters contained a small wildfire Thursday in Williams near Oak and 11th streets despite a drone flying over the area that temporarily delayed the arrival of a helicopter attempting to drop water on the blaze.

The Williams Fire, which was reported to the Williams Dispatch Center at about 12:45 p.m. Thursday and said to be located on the southwest side of Cemetery Hill, was less than a quarter mile away from residences in the area. Kaibab National Forest fire officials arrived on scene and immediately requested that a helicopter that was prepositioned at the Williams Airport be dispatched to drop water on the fire.

As the helicopter was preparing to launch, incident commander Mike Uebel reported that an unmanned aerial vehicle, also known as a drone, was flying over the fire. The helicopter was advised to stand down until representatives from the Coconino County Sheriff's Office could find the operator and get the drone cleared from the area.

The drone eventually departed the fire area, and Uebel was able to guide the helicopter into the location to make water drops. Other firefighting resources working to suppress the Williams Fire included four engines and a dozer. While the Williams Fire was contained at less than an acre in size, the situation could have ended very differently, according to fire officials.

"People may be flying a drone thinking it's cool to get video footage of a wildfire, but they don't realize the impacts they have on our ability to do our jobs," Uebel said. "Sometimes your actions that seem harmless can have major impacts to the safety of firefighters and to the safety of our community. If we can't respond, we can't put out the fire."

Members of the public should never fly an unmanned aerial vehicle over or near a wildfire. Unauthorized drone flights could cause serious injury or death to firefighters in the air or firefighters and members of the public on the ground. Firefighting aircraft, such as air attack, lead planes, airtankers and helicopters, typically fly in smoky, windy and turbulent conditions. Safety depends on knowing what other aircraft are operating in the airspace and where they are at all times. This is compromised by the presence of unauthorized drones.

"We don't want recreational drone use to impede the response of aerial resources. On another day when conditions weren't as favorable for us, we could have had a different outcome," said Jeremy Human, fire management officer for the Williams and Tusayan ranger districts.

The cause of the fire is under investigation. The drone never reappeared and the operator was not found. Representatives from Coconino County Sheriff's Office, Williams Police Department and Williams Fire Department all assisted Kaibab National Forest fire officials in the fire suppression effort.

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