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USFWS INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 31, 2019

TO: Margaret Everson, Principal Deputy Director, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Exercising the Authority of the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

FROM: Jerome Ford, Assistant Director for Migratory Birds, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

SUBJECT: Grounding of Non-emergency Unmanned Aircraft Systems

I. STATEMENT OF ISSUE/KEY FACTS

The memorandum outlines the effects of the grounding of all non-emergency unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) throughout the Department of the Interior and Fish and Wildlife Service.

II. BACKGROUND AND FWS POSITION

On October 30, 2019, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget directed all Bureaus, “that effective immediately, and until further notice, all non-emergency missions for drones owned or leased by the Department of the Interior and its bureaus are to cease. We will continue to use drones for emergency purposes, such as fighting wildfires, search and rescue, and dealing with natural disasters that may threaten life or property... This direction may be revised after the Department has had the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive review of its drone program.”

III. POSITION OF AFFECTED PARTIES/PUBLIC LANDS AFFECTED

Resource managers and staff at several national wildlife refuges, national parks and state preserves wish to resume operations as soon as possible to avoid lapses in data collection, sensitive species monitoring and critical habitat assessment.

IV. STATUS UPDATE

The grounding of the fleet will affect all aspects of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s mission. FWS Remote Pilots immediately canceled missions ranging from training flights to prescribed burns, to natural resource monitoring. Below are examples of affected operations:

- The cancellation of multiple flights in the southeast United States directly affected the ability to monitor prescribed burns. The Prescribed Burn Team began looking for a manned helicopter crew to conduct the mission. This would result in a significant increase in risk and financial cost associated with this mission.

- In Alaska, the grounding of the fleet cancelled a mission for monitoring fish passage improvement projects. This mission would allow a big-picture view of how improvement projects have affected anadromous streams that cross roadways. These crossings have a direct effect on the migration and spawning of fish.
- In Louisiana, the UAS grounding cancelled missions supporting waterfowl counts and the monitoring the conditions of moist soil impoundments.
- A mission to monitor the critically endangered pine Rockland Ecosystem at Navy Wells Pineland Preserve in Florida was cancelled. The same crew was also had to cancel post-wildfire habitat surveys of another Pine Rockland preserve, at Everglades National Park, and shallow water vegetation surveys for rare fish species.
- Other cancelled missions include public outreach operations, wetland surveys, irrigation channel and fish screen installations, prescribed fires activities, Osprey surveys, bird strike prevention, and training flights. There is ample evidence to suggest that the grounding of the Bureau's UAS Program will have a direct negative effect across Regions and Programs: EA, LE, MB, Fisheries, Refuges.

V. POTENTIAL ISSUES

Several mission critical activities have been suspended and could have measurable impacts if not resumed soon. Some operations are time-sensitive and conditional upon the presence of threatened or endangered species and/or current habitat conditions. A lapse in data collection, sensitive species monitoring and critical habitat assessment affects the Service's ability to confidently and accurately determine natural resource outcomes.

VI. TIMELINE/NEXT STEPS

The resumption of UAS operations is unknown at this time.

Prepared by: Jerome Ford, Assistant Director for Migratory Birds

☐ **FYI** or ☒ **Requested by:** Margaret Everson

☐ **Prepared for a meeting:** *[meeting date] [meeting invite title]*