



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Guidelines for Use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Around Polar Bears, Sea Otters, and Walruses

Unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), also known as drones, are an increasingly popular recreational and commercial platform for observing wildlife and wild places. However, flying over or near marine mammals such as polar bears, sea otters, and walruses, may cause significant stress, harm, or even death to these sensitive species. **Marine mammals resting on land are particularly vulnerable to stress and should not be approached or disturbed with a drone.**

In the U.S., all marine mammals are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which makes it illegal to disturb or harass them. In simple terms, **it is unlawful to change the behavior of any marine mammal in its natural environment without specific authorization to do so.**

Since UAS are classified as aircraft, it is also unlawful (under the Airborne Hunting Act) to use drones for any aspect of hunting or harassing wildlife.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has management oversight for polar bears, sea otters, and walruses in Alaska. Due to the rapid pace at which UAS technology is advancing, scientific data is lacking to determine at what distances UAS can be flown safely without disturbing these species. Therefore, FWS requests that a precautionary approach be used when operating UAS in marine mammal habitat: **UAS operators should avoid flying UAS near marine mammals.**



Unless specifically authorized, all approaches toward marine mammals must cease if any animal becomes alert and notices the UAS.

To obtain viewing guidelines: Species-specific viewing guidelines for polar bears, sea otters, and walruses are available from the Marine Mammals Management Office at toll-free tel. 1-800-362-5148.

To obtain a “take” permit: if an operator wishes to obtain a permit to approach polar bears, sea otters or walruses using a UAS for commercial, educational, or scientific purposes, please contact the Division of Management Authority at toll-free tel. 1-800-358-2104.

To report incidents of harassment: please contact FWS’ Office of Law Enforcement at toll-free tel. 1-800-858-7621.

REMEMBER: each operator is responsible for ensuring compliance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations that apply to UAS, and any additional restrictions that may apply for private, military, tribal, and protected lands. Use of UAS is prohibited on many public lands in Alaska; check with the landowner before your trip. For more information, please visit the following sites:

- http://www.govregs.com/regulations/title50_chapterI_part27_subpartC_section27.34
- <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/uas.html>
- http://www.faa.gov/uas/getting_started/fly_for_work_business
- http://www.faa.gov/uas/getting_started/fly_for_fun/
- http://www.dot.alaska.gov/documents/aviation/Alaska_Drone_Safety_Guidelines.pdf