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Private drone operator impedes MOFD firefighting efforts

By Nick Marnell



Photo courtesy MOFD

Crews from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, Cal Fire and the East Bay Regional Park District extinguished a 1-acre vegetation fire June 7 on a steep hillside off of Canyon Road, about 200 yards east of the temporary bridge linking Canyon and Moraga. Aerial firefighting efforts were hampered because a privately owned drone flew over the incident site, preventing a helicopter from dropping water onto the burning vegetation.

"We searched the area, but we were not able to locate the owner of the drone," according to Moraga Chief of Police Jon King. The chief said that people who fly drones are probably not trying to interfere with an incident, but they can cause major damage or injuries. In this case, had the drone flew into the windshield of the helicopter, a tragedy could have resulted.

"We were fortunate that the firefighters on the ground were able to get the fire under control," King said.

The blaze occurred the day the National Weather Service issued its first Red Flag Warning, an alert signifying that the temperatures, winds and low humidity conspire to create the potential for significant wildfires. "Had this incident been later in the season, it could have been disastrous," said MOFD spokesman Dennis Rein, who confirmed that there were no injuries and no homes were ever in danger. The fire remains under investigation.

"If you fly, we can't," Rein warned drone operators.

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