

Don't drone on: Providing clear and concise communications for unmanned aerial systems programs

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the Placer Mosquito and Vector Control District (District) began to explore the utility of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), otherwise known as drones, in mosquito and vector control. In January of 2017, the District's Board of Trustees passed a resolution recognizing the vector control benefits which resolved "that the Placer Mosquito and Vector Control District Board of Trustees hereby support the development of UAS technology for the purposes of protecting public health, and shall develop and implement policies and procedures to ensure the judicious and safe use of UAS technology in vector assessment and control operations". Since then, the District has purchased several UAS and has committed staff to development and implementation of UAS in field operations.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As the Placer Mosquito and Vector Control District began the exploratory process of UAS technology integration into existing surveillance and control programs, District staff recognized the importance of external communications surrounding the use of UAS. As certain UAS products became readily available to public and private agencies, as well as the general public, it was expected that there would be concerns about what drone users should be allowed and not allowed to do. Privacy concerns over UAS use were also a part of the popular culture zeitgeist at the time.

APPROACH

District staff understood the importance of communicating with partner agencies and the public about the benefits of UAS technology for mosquito control to help assuage potential concerns over data collection and privacy. A communication strategy was developed to help address public concerns, as well as educate and recruit partner agencies to assist with any potential communications from members of the public around UAS activities .

RESULTS

The Public Affairs Manager, with guidance from the District's General Manager, then developed a UAS Communication Strategy that included the following components:

- Backgrounder Sheet
- MAC UAS Flight Notifications
- Webpage
- Social media
- Media advocacy

CONCLUSION

Implementation of the UAS Communication Strategy is ongoing, and additional meetings with partner agencies are currently underway. The District has found that being proactive with UAS communications in anticipation of questions or concerns has been beneficial as far as being able to direct the narrative around UAS use with the media, fostering positive relationships with partner agencies, and gaining and maintaining public trust.