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Oceans Unmanned Launches freeFLY Drone Program

Oceans Unmanned, Inc., in partnership with NOAA Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (HIHWNMS), with additional support from DJI and DARTdrones, unveiled a new initiative designed to provide aerial support using small drones for large whale entanglement response efforts off of Maui, Hawaii. The freeFLY program provides training, equipment, and management oversight to a network of local, Maui-based volunteer drone operators that are available to support the Hawaiian Islands Entanglement Response Network, led by HIHWNMS. The Network's goals are to safely free endangered humpback whales and other marine animals from life threatening entanglements, while also gathering valuable information that will reduce entanglement threats in the future.

The addition of aerial imagery from on-scene, vessel-launched drones will provide responders improved situational awareness and increased safety for both the animal and responder. "Cutting free a 45-foot, 40-ton free swimming animal is not an easy task; it can be dangerous. Drones may likely play an important role as they are a valuable tool toward reducing the risks involved in this type of effort," said Ed Lyman, NOAA Large Whale Entanglement Response Coordinator. "As a public reminder, it is important to understand that response to entangled whales involving a close approach (less than 100 yards) may only be attempted by persons authorized under permit by NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program"

"While these off-the-shelf systems can be relatively easy to fly while on land, operating off a small boat and providing the responders the imagery they need in a timely manner can be challenging," said Brian Taggart, Chief Pilot for Oceans Unmanned, "the freeFLY program will ensure all operators are well trained and equipped, operate at the highest level of safety and professionalism, and meet the requirements under the NOAA permit." A recent training class has certified three local volunteer operators to support response efforts through the end of the current whale season with additional training scheduled in the fall.

DJI, the industry leader in easy-to-fly drones and aerial photography systems, is donating Phantom 4 Pro systems and accessories to the program. In addition, DARTdrones, the nation's leader in drone training and consulting services, has provided online Part 107 Remote Pilot Certificate test preparation classes for experienced candidates to become FAA compliant as required.

Oceans Unmanned, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that facilitates the use of unmanned technologies and promotes their safe and environmentally conscious operation to protect the ocean and coastal marine environment. (www.oceansunmanned.org)

NOAA's Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary was established in 1992 to protect humpback whales and their habitat in Hawaii. The sanctuary emphasizes research, education and community-based resource protection in a diverse set of conservation programs across the state. (www.hawaiihumpbackwhale.noaa.gov)

MEDIA: images and video available on request