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Oceans Unmanned Expands freeFLY Drone Program to Alaska

Oceans Unmanned, Inc., in partnership with Alaska Sea Grant and Aleutian Aerial LLC, with additional support from DJI, recently expanded their freeFLY initiative into Dutch Harbor, Alaska to provide drone aerial support for marine mammal entanglement response efforts in the region. Launched earlier this year in Hawaii, the freeFLY program provides training, equipment, and management oversight to networks of local volunteer drone operators that are available to support response groups. The goals of the Dutch Harbor network, led by Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, are to safely free endangered 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 responders. “The use of drone technology will be a huge advantage to our response capabilities. The ability to decrease the interactions between responders and an entangled animal will increase the safety for all involved.” said Melissa (Missy) Good, the Regional Entanglement Response Coordinator. “As a public reminder, marine mammals are wild animals and getting close increases the risk of being bitten or injured. Marine mammals should not be approached closer than 100 yards, in addition, stranded animals are likely already stressed, and your presence will increase their stress.

“Operating drones 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 ensures 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 a local volunteer operator to support response efforts this year with additional training scheduled in 2019. DJI, the industry leader in easy-to-fly drones and aerial photography systems, has donated Phantom 4 Pro systems and accessories to the program.

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)

Alaska Sea Grant is part of the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and part of the National Sea Grant Program, a division of NOAA. To report a marine mammal stranding call the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward at 1-888-774-7325. (www.alaskaseagrants.org)

Aleutian Aerial LLC is an Unalaska/Dutch Harbor based drone service provider serving the Aleutian Islands and Southeast Alaska. Aleutian Aerial specializes in aerial photography, videography, environmental monitoring, habitat assessment, and aerial mosaics. (www.aleutianaerial.com)

MEDIA: images and video available on request