



Jeffrey R. Gahler,
Sheriff

HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE OPERATIONS POLICY

Drone as First Responder

Distribution:	All Employees			Policy Number:	OPS 0732
Responsible Unit:	Special Operations Division			Rescinds:	NEW POLICY
Original Issued Date:	05/31/26	Revision #:	N/A	Latest Revision Date:	05/31/26
Required 3-year review was completed:		05/30/26	Next Required 3-yr Review Due:		05/31/29

1. Purpose

To provide personnel with operational guidance for the deployment and use of Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) as a Drone as First Responder (DFR) and instructions on when and how this technology and the information it provides may be used for law enforcement and public safety purposes in accordance with the law.

2. Policy

The Harford County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) will utilize sUAS as a Drone as First Responder (DFR) resource to support law enforcement and public safety operations in accordance with applicable law and policy.

The DFR program falls under the command of the Special Operations Division (SOD) Commander and will operate in conjunction with, but separate from, the traditional sUAS deployment model governed by policy [OPS 0728 Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#).

When multiple HCSO unmanned aircraft systems are operating concurrently, DFR operations will retain primary airspace coordination authority unless otherwise directed by a supervisor.

3. Definitions

AGENCY CERTIFIED PILOT: a Team member who has completed all Agency-required sUAS training and holds required FAA pilot certifications.

ASSISTANT TEAM LEADER (ATL): an Agency Certified Pilot who assists the Team Leader (TL) in the responsibilities and oversight, planning and daily operations of the team, fills in as TL in his absence.

BEYOND VISUAL LINE OF SIGHT (BVLOS): sUAS operations conducted where the aircraft is not continuously visible to the pilot or visual observer and is conducted only pursuant to FAA authorization.

CERTIFICATE OF WAIVER OR AUTHORIZATION (COA): FAA grant of approval for a specific flight operation which is in deviation from any regulations specified in 14 CFR Part 107 (i.e. nighttime operations and operations in certain airspace).

DEDRONE AIRSPACE AWARENESS SYSTEM: a ground-based radar and sensor system used to detect and provide situational awareness of cooperative and non-cooperative aircraft operating in the vicinity of DFR operations.

DFR HUB: a fixed location from which a DFR aircraft is deployed.

DIGITAL MULTIMEDIA EVIDENCE (DME): digital recording of images and associated data captured during DFR operations.

DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER (DFR): the deployment of an sUAS from a pre-positioned launch location in response to real-time emergency communications, officer-initiated activity, or unfolding incidents, prior to or independent of the arrival of on-scene personnel.

FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (FAA): the agency of the United States Department of Transportation responsible for the regulations and oversight of civil aviation within the U.S., as well as operation and development of the National Airspace System.

JOINT UAS OPERATIONS: operations in which more than one unmanned aircraft system is deployed simultaneously in support of the same incident, whether operated by HCSO personnel or assisting agencies.

NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM: the common network of U.S. airspace; air navigation facilities, equipment, and services; airports or landing areas; aeronautical charts, information, and services; related rules, regulations, and procedures; technical information; and manpower and material.

REMOTE PILOT CERTIFICATION: issued by the FAA under 14 CFR Part 107. For the first-time pilots, the FAA requires passing of the aeronautical knowledge exam at an FAA approved testing center. Certificate holders must pass a recurrent knowledge test every two years.

REMOTE PILOT IN COMMAND (RPIC): an Agency trained person who holds a current or active remote pilot certificate with an sUAS rating and exercises control over a sUAS during flight. The Remote Pilot in Command has final authority and responsibility for the operation and safety of sUAS during operations.

SMALL UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEM(sUAS): a system that includes the necessary equipment, network, and personnel to control an unmanned aircraft weighing less than 55 pounds, consistent with FAA regulations.

TEAM LEADER (TL): an Agency certified pilot (Supervisor) responsible for oversight, planning and daily operations of the Team.

UNMANNED AIRCRAFT (UA): an aircraft that is intended to navigate in the air without the possibility of direct human intervention from within or on the aircraft.

VISUAL OBSERVER (VO): a person who assists the pilot by supplementing situational awareness and assisting with identification of other air traffic, objects, or hazards. Does not need to be a member of the sUAS Team but is recommended.

4. References

FAA Part 91 Authorizations and Waivers issued to the Harford County Sheriff's Office
Code of Federal Regulations, Title 14, Subchapter F, Part 107
Code of Federal Regulations, Title 14, section 107.165
Code of Federal Regulations, Title 49, Part 830
HCSO [OPS 0728 – Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#)
HCSO [OPS 1206 – Digital Multimedia Evidence Retention](#)

5. Procedure

A. Deployments

1. DFR deployments may be initiated based on monitored emergency communications, calls for service, officer-initiated activity, or supervisory direction.
2. The HCSO has adopted the use of DFR to provide an aerial-visual perspective to assist Agency members with the following objectives:
 - a. Officer and Public Safety: to enhance situational awareness during calls for service and evolving incidents;
 - b. Situational Assessment: to assist decision makers in understanding the nature, scale, and scope of an incident and determining appropriate response;
 - c. Call Resolution: to assist patrol with resolving calls for service, including those that may not require an on-scene patrol response;
 - d. Fleeing Suspects or Vehicles: to assist with tracking or locating suspects or vehicles involved in criminal or hazardous activity;
 - e. Scene Documentation: to document a crime scene, crash scene, or other significant incident; and
 - f. Natural Disasters and Emergencies: to assist with disaster and recovery management, incident response, and large-scale emergencies in compliance with HCSO policy OPS 0731- All Hazards.
3. The DFR sUAS may be deployed upon request of any federal, state, local, or other agency in support consistently with the HCSO policy and procedures.
4. All DFR equipment, data, images, video, and metadata are the sole property of the HCSO.

B. Use of DFR

1. The HCSO will obtain all applicable authorizations, permits, or certificates of waiver required by the FAA prior to conducting DFR operations in the National Airspace System. The sUAS TL or ATL will be responsible for obtaining and maintaining these authorizations and waivers. Records will be maintained on the sUAS Team shared s: drive.
2. DFR aircraft will only be operated by Agency Certified Pilots who have been trained in the operation of the DFR system and certified by the FAA.
3. A minimum of two Agency Certified Pilots will be assigned during active DFR operations. While one pilot is operating the aircraft as the Remote Pilot in Command (RPIC), the second pilot may perform duties consistent with a tactical flight officer role, to include:
 - a. Handling communications with field units, supervisors, and incident command;
 - b. Notifying the School Policing Unit Supervisor when the operation is conducted over or in close proximity to a school that is in session;

- c. Monitoring weather conditions and changes impacting safe flight;
 - d. Assisting with aircraft/airspace deconfliction and coordination during Joint UAS Operations;
 - e. Assisting units on the ground with perimeter coordination, search coordination, and real-time information updates based on the live video feed;
 - f. Preparing contingency plans for loss of link, emergency procedures, and safe recovery operations;
 - g. Assisting with mission continuity during extended operations; and
 - h. In accordance with FAA restrictions prohibiting a person from acting as RPIC or manipulating flight controls for more than one unmanned aircraft at the same time, the second pilot may assume RPIC responsibilities for an additional DFR aircraft when operationally necessary (e.g., vehicle pursuits, extended operations, large area searches) to leapfrog coverage by launching a second aircraft to establish on-station presence prior to battery replacement/recovery of the first aircraft, or to stage coverage in an anticipated direction of travel beyond the immediate reachability of the first aircraft.
- 4. One pilot will be designated as RPIC for each aircraft and will have final authority for the operation and safety of the sUAS.
 - 5. The TL, or other sworn supervisor, will provide oversight of all DFR operations and may terminate any DFR mission based on safety, legal, or operational concerns.

C. Flight Operations and Recording

- 1. Due to system design, DFR aircraft record from launch to landing.
- 2. To minimize unnecessary data collection, pilots will maintain the camera oriented from 45 degrees to the horizon during transit whenever practicable.
- 3. Focused observation will be limited to the area of the call for service unless updated information indicates a fleeing suspect, vehicle, or other public safety concern.
- 4. Audio recording is prohibited during all DFR operations.

D. Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) Operations

- 1. DFR operations may be conducted BVLOS only in accordance with FAA Part 91 authority and approved waivers.
- 2. Standard BVLOS operations will be conducted at or below 200 feet Above Ground Level (AGL).
- 3. BVLOS operations up to 400 feet AGL may be conducted only upon FAA approval of the applicable waiver.

4. The Dedrone airspace awareness system should be operational prior to and during DFR operations and utilized as an additional safety measure.

E. Weather and Environmental Limitations

1. DFR operations will be conducted only when weather and environmental conditions support safe and compliant flight.
2. DFR aircraft should not be launched unless exigent circumstances exist with TL approval under any of the following conditions:
 - a. Sustained surface winds exceeding 25 mph or gusts exceeding 30 mph;
 - b. Freezing rain, sleet, or mixed winter precipitation;
 - c. Moderate or heavy rain;
 - d. Snowfall that results in visible moisture accumulation on aircraft surfaces;
 - e. Known or observed icing conditions;
 - f. Electrical storms within the operational area;
 - g. Visibility less than 3 statute miles;
 - h. Ceiling below 400 feet AGL for BVLOS operations; or
 - i. Ambient temperatures below 14°F (-10°C) or above 104°F (40°C).
3. Light rain or mist may be acceptable only when:
 - a. No freezing conditions exist;
 - b. Manufacturer limitations allow flight in precipitation; and
 - c. The RPIC determines conditions do not adversely affect aircraft performance or sensor effectiveness.
4. The RPIC will consider wind at operating altitude, turbulence near structures, and localized weather effects when evaluating launch decisions.
5. The RPIC retains final authority to delay, decline, or terminate a DFR operation due to weather or environmental concerns, regardless of call priority.
6. More restrictive aircraft manufacturer limitations will supersede the thresholds listed in this policy.

F. Livestreaming

1. Live video may be streamed during DFR operations; however, viewing should be limited to authorized personnel with a legitimate operational need.
2. Members will not access, distribute, forward, or otherwise share live DFR video feeds or access links except for a legitimate law enforcement purpose and only authorized personnel.

G. Restrictions

1. DFR will be deployed with the following restrictions:
 - a. DFR will be used only to support official law enforcement, public safety missions and training;
 - b. DFR will not be operated in an unsafe manner or in violation of FAA rules;
 - c. DFR aircraft will not be equipped with weapons of any kind;
 - d. DFR will not be used to conduct generalized patrol or continuous aerial surveillance unrelated to a specific call for service, officer-initiated incident, or documented operational purpose;
 - e. DFR will not be used to target, harass, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual or group based solely on protected characteristics or absence of legitimate law enforcement or public safety purpose;
 - f. DFR aircraft will not be integrated with facial recognition, biometric identification, or similar analytic technologies; and
 - g. DFR aircraft shall weigh less than 55 pounds on takeoff or have a FAA waiver.

H. Retention and Management of Digital Multimedia Evidence (DME)

1. All DFR recordings constitute DME.
2. All DME will be uploaded to the appropriate Axon ecosystem, including Evidence.com, when available.
3. Retention and deletion of DFR recordings will be governed by HCSO [OPS 1206 – Digital Multimedia Evidence Retention](#) policy and 14 CFR 107.165 Records Retention.

I. Training

1. Personnel assigned as DFR pilots must be Agency Certified sUAS Pilots.
2. DFR pilots will complete Agency-approved DFR-specific training (e.g., Skydio and/or Axon training) prior to independent DFR operations.
3. Continued training and proficiency requirements will remain consistent with [OPS 0728 – Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#).
4. The sUAS TL and ATL will maintain DFR training and certification records and forward copies of all documentation to the Training Academy for inclusion in the employee's training folder.

J. Supervision and Reporting

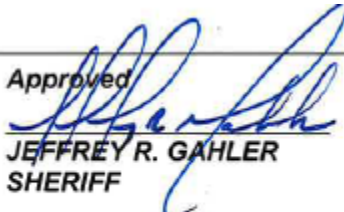
1. All DFR deployments will be documented in accordance with [OPS 0728 – Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#) and logged in the sUAS deployment log located in the Drone Folder. Major incident DFR deployments will also be documented under the Small Unmanned Aircraft folder within the Agency Law Enforcement Records Management System.
2. The sUAS TL will review DFR deployments on a monthly basis to ensure compliance with policy.
3. An annual internal report documenting DFR deployment and use will be available to the SOD Commander.
4. Any DFR operation incidents, outside of normal operations, will be immediately reported to the DFR Supervisor and the SOD chain of command.
5. As required by the FAA, any operation of a sUAS involving the following will be reported online (www.faa.gov/uas/report_accident) to the FAA by the pilot no later than 10 calendar days after the operation/accident:
 - a. Any occurrence where the use of a sUAS causes serious injury, any loss of consciousness to any person; or
 - b. Damage to any property other than sUAS, the value (or repair costs) of which exceeds \$500.00.

K. Selection

1. Selection of DFR pilots is competitive and will be conducted from a list of existing Agency Certified sUAS Pilots who have demonstrated proficiency in sUAS operations and are approved by the Sheriff or his designee.

6. Summary of Changes

- A. On 05/31/26 this policy was created.

Approved

JEFFREY R. GAHLER
SHERIFF
DATE 5/30/26