Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)

Responsible Official:	Vice Chancellor for Physical Operations, Planning and Development & Chief Operating Officer
Responsible Office:	Office of Environmental Health and Safety UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety
Issuance Date:	December 21, 2016
Effective Date:	December 21, 2016
Summary:	Expectation of safe operation of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) and explanation of the university's regulatory compliance and reporting requirements.
Scope:	UC Merced faculty, staff, students, and non-affiliates operating, purchasing, or contracting UAS.

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I. POLICY SUMMARY & SCOPE

This Policy is intended to promote safe operation of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) while meeting the university's regulatory compliance and reporting requirements.

This Policy applies to:

- UC Merced faculty, staff, and students, operating UAS for any University Business.
- UC Merced faculty, staff, and students and non-affiliates, including third-party contractors and hobbyists, operating UAS for any purpose on or above university-owned or leased property;
- The purchase of a UAS or the parts to assemble a UAS with funding by the university, including from university accounts, grants, or gifts and;
- The hiring of or contracting for any UAS by a university unit.

II. DEFINITIONS

Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA): An authorization issued by the Air Traffic Organization, a division of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), for UAS operations.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): A division of the Department of Transportation that inspects and rates civilian aircraft and pilots, enforces the rules of air safety, and installs and maintains air-navigation and traffic-control facilities.

Recreational Use: Use of a UAS for non-business purposes as a hobby or as part of a non-commercial community-based organization.

UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety: Provides expertise, support, and training for regulatory compliance, risk management, and the safe operation of UAS across the University of California system. It also grants certain forms of approval for UAS operations in the US.

Unmanned Aerial System (UAS): The term "unmanned aircraft system" means an unmanned aircraft and associated elements (including communication links and the components that control the unmanned aircraft) that are required for the pilot in command to operate safely and efficiently in the national airspace system. UAS may have a variety of names, including model aircraft, quadcopter, or quadrotor.

University Business: The official activities of a university that contribute to any one of the university's major functions of teaching, research, patient care, or public service, or to any other non-recreational university purpose.

III. POLICY TEXT

This Policy is intended to promote safe operation of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) while meeting the university's regulatory compliance and reporting requirements.

1. The operation of Unmanned Aerial Systems/vehicles (UAS) on the UC Merced campus or any UC Merced owned or leased lands, or within UC Merced interior building spaces, is prohibited except as approved in advance by the UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety.

2. The operation of UC owned Unmanned Aerial Systems/vehicles (UAS) must be approved in advanced by the UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety. All UAS owned by the UC must be registered to the Regents of the University of California and documented with the UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety.

3. All approved uses of UAS under this Policy ***must*** comply fully with all applicable FAA regulations and state and local laws for the flight of UAS. The UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety is responsible for identifying the necessary documentation and interpretation of applicable regulations. Any required FAA documentation, such as Remote Pilot Certificates or COAs, must be presented to the UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety prior to approval to operate the UAS on UC Merced property.

4. Operation of a UAS by a third party, including hobbyists or recreational use, on UC Merced property must be pursuant to an agreement to indemnify and hold the university harmless from any resulting claims or harm to individuals and damage to university property, and the operator must provide evidence of insurance as required by Risk Services.

5. The proposed UAS operation must be in the best interest of the campus community and not pose an unacceptable threat to safety, privacy or the environment. The decision is evaluated based on compliance with federal and local laws and UC policy, risks to property or physical harm to campus occupants, and privacy concerns. Approval, once given, may be rescinded if it is determined that the information provided is incorrect or incomplete or if circumstances have changed and a determination is made that the planned operation is not in the community's best interest.

6. University funds cannot be used to purchase a UAS unless the individual has been made aware of the federal and state regulations regarding their usage, and understands the requirements to comply with any relevant policy.

7. Prior approval for the use of UAS by the UC Merced Police Department and other law enforcement agencies (including but not limited to City of Merced Fire Department, City of Merced Police Department, or other first responders) in exigent or emergency circumstances is not required. Routine use of UAS by law enforcement agencies is subject to this policy. Any law enforcement agency operating a UAS in exigent or emergency circumstances without prior approval shall notify the UC Merced Police Department as soon as reasonably practicable.

8. For questions and to apply for approval, contact the UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety. The UC Center of Excellence manages the UC UAS Fleet Management system, which includes an online flight request and reporting system, and monitors UAS inventory and pilot qualifications. Allow a minimum of 3 business days for the approval process prior to the date of planned operation.

IV. RESPONSIBILITIES

The UC Merced Office of Environmental Health and Safety is responsible for the implementation and enforcement of this policy.

The UC Center of Excellence on UAS Safety is responsible for the interpretation of FAA regulations and state and local laws.

V. REFERENCES AND RESOURCES.

Federal Laws and Regulations

- Federal Aviation Administration - UAS Regulation

State Laws and Regulations

- CA Assembly Bill, 2015-2016, 856: Invasion of Privacy
- CA Senate Bill, 2015-2016, 807: Unmanned Aircraft Systems
- CA Assembly Bill, 2015-2016, 1680: Crimes: Emergency Personnel
- CA Senate Bill, 2017-2018, 1355: Unmanned Aircraft Systems: Correctional Facilities
- CA Assembly Bill, 2025-2026, 1749: Interfering with Wildfire Suppression and Emergency Responses with Drone
- CA Assembly Bill, 2025-2026, 2113: Aviation: Unmanned Aircraft Systems: Ticketed Entertainment Events and Amusement Parks

UC Policies

- UC Unmanned Aircraft System (Drone) Policy

Guidelines/Resources

- Federal Aviation Administration: Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) FAQ/Help
- UC Merced Unmanned Aircraft Systems Safety Website
- UC Office of the President Unmanned Aircraft Systems Safety Website
- UAS Insurance Requirements (UCOP)
- UC Safety Website

VI. REVISION HISTORY

Date	Action/Summary of Changes
November 4, 2026	Technical revisions including: • Updated the Responsible Official and Responsible Office due to operational reorganization • Removed references to "Model Aircraft", as that is no longer a recognized legal definition, and added Model Aircraft as a type of UAS • Removed references to obligations outside of UC Merced's jurisdiction • Added references to new California regulations • Minor updates for clarity and adherence to the policy style guide
April 15, 2026	Updated policy formatting to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0
December 21, 2016	Original Policy issued