Unmanned Aircraft Systems

606.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this Policy is to establish the policies and procedures for the operation of unmanned aircraft systems ("UAS"), commonly referred to as "drones," including as part of a Drone as First Responder ("DFR") program.

UAS supports police, fire, and medical responses by providing timely situational awareness during dangerous or critical incidents. Through the Drone as a First Responder program, personnel can assess conditions before responding deputies arrive and use that information to coordinate the response and deploy resources more effectively. This enhanced awareness helps personnel develop informed strategies and approach incidents with the goal of improving safety, de-escalating confrontations, and reducing the potential for violent encounters and the need to use force.

The Department is committed to using UAS in a responsible, lawful, and transparent manner to support public safety and serve the people of Ventura County.UAS will be used only as authorized by this Policy and applicable law, including the United States Constitution, and in a manner that protects civil liberties, privacy, and the public trust.The Department will use UAS to improve emergency response, enhance situational awareness, and support officer and community safety, while ensuring that this technology is used lawfully and ethically.

This policy is designed to minimize risks to people, property, and aircraft during UAS operations.It also intends to ensure that UAS are operated in a responsible, lawful manner consistent with the United States Constitution, Constitution of the State of California, federal regulations, and state and local laws, and to ensure that the civil liberties of all persons are protected.

606.2 DEFINITIONS

Definitions related to this policy include:

Unmanned aircraft system (UAS) - An unmanned aircraft of any type that is capable of sustaining directed flight, whether preprogrammed or remotely controlled, and all of the supporting or attached systems designed for gathering information through imaging, recording or any other means.

Drone as First Responder (DFR) - A pre-positioned, dock-based UAS remotely operated from the Sheriff's Communications Center for the purpose of responding to active calls for service and providing aerial support to patrol and management resources through the use of live video feeds.

606.3 POLICY

Unmanned aircraft systems may be utilized to enhance the Ventura County Sheriff's Office mission of protecting lives and property. Any use of a UAS will be in strict accordance with constitutional and privacy rights and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations.

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/10/21, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by Ventura County Sheriff's Office

606.4 PRIVACY

Pilots shall take reasonable steps to limit UAS observation and recording to areas and activities relevant to an authorized public safety mission, navigation or air safety. Absent a warrant or exigent circumstances, operators and observers shall not intentionally record or transmit images of any location where a person would otherwise have a reasonable expectation of privacy (e.g., residence, yard, enclosure). Operators and observers shall take reasonable precautions to avoid inadvertently recording or transmitting images of unrelated areas where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Reasonable precautions can include, for example, deactivating or turning imaging devices away from such areas or persons during UAS operations.

When consistent with safe operation, during transit, pilots should orient the main camera to minimize observation of areas unrelated to the authorized mission. It is often best practice to keep the main camera level with the horizon while in transit.

Pilots shall not use a UAS to create a vantage point for the purpose of seeing, hearing, or recording unrelated private activity that could not reasonably be observed by a person from a lawful public location, unless authorized by a search warrant or by probable cause with a recognized exception to the Fourth Amendment warrant requirement.

Pilots shall not use thermal imaging to view intimate details of private activity from the interior of a home or structure, unless authorized by a search warrant, by probable cause, or under a recognized exception to the Fourth Amendment warrant requirement.

Nothing in this section prohibits a pilot from briefly viewing or recording areas incidentally captured during launch, landing, navigation, air safety maneuvers, or response to an authorized public safety mission, provided the pilot does not intentionally focus on private areas unrelated to the mission.

606.5 PROGRAM COORDINATOR

The Sheriff will appoint a program coordinator who will be responsible for the management of the UAS program. The program coordinator will ensure that policies and procedures conform to current laws, regulations, and best practices and will have the following additional responsibilities:

- Coordinating the FAA Certificate of Waiver (COW) application process and ensuring that the COW is current.
- Ensuring that all authorized operators and required observers have completed all required FAA and department-approved training in the operation, applicable laws, policies, and procedures regarding use of the UAS.
- Developing uniform protocol for submission and evaluation of requests to deploy a UAS, including urgent requests made during ongoing or emerging incidents.
- Coordinating the completion of the FAA Emergency Operation Request Form in emergency situations, as applicable (e.g., natural disasters, search and rescue, emergency situations to safeguard human life).
- Developing protocol for conducting criminal investigations involving a UAS.

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/10/21, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by Ventura County Sheriff's Office

- Developing an operational protocol governing the deployment and operation of a UAS including but not limited to safety oversight, use of visual observers, establishment of lost link procedures, and secure communication with air traffic control facilities.
- Developing a protocol for fully documenting all missions.
- Developing a UAS inspection, maintenance, and record-keeping protocol to ensure continuing airworthiness of a UAS, up to and including its overhaul or life limits.
- Developing protocols to ensure that all data intended to be used as evidence are accessed, maintained, stored, and retrieved in a manner that ensures its integrity as evidence, including strict adherence to chain of custody requirements.
- Developing protocols that ensure retention and purge periods are maintained in accordance with established records retention schedules.
- Facilitating law enforcement access to images and data captured by the UAS.
- Recommending program enhancements, particularly regarding safety and information security.
- Maintaining familiarity with FAA regulatory standards, state laws and regulations, and local ordinances regarding the operations of a UAS.
- Develop policies and procedures for regular auditing of the program to ensure that aircraft are launched only for authorized uses, that pilots adhere to policy or program requirements to include timely record keeping for transparency and accountability, and that data is shared or accessed only in compliance with this Policy.

606.6 USE OF UAS

Unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) shall be deployed only for public safety missions as authorized by this Policy, in compliance with all applicable laws, and only by trained and authorized personnel. UAS must not be used as a generalized surveillance tool to indiscriminately collect data without lawful basis.

Use of vision enhancement technology (e.g., thermal and other imaging equipment not generally available to the public) is permissible in viewing areas only where there is no protectable privacy interest or when in compliance with a search warrant or court order. In all other instances, legal counsel should be consulted.

UAS operations should only be conducted consistent with FAA regulations.

Use of UAS includes, but is not limited to:

- Response to a call for service or incident logged into the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system.
- During the investigation of criminal activity or pursuant to a search warrant or court order.
- Support of an incident to which an employee of the Department responds or attends within the scope of their employment.

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/10/21, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by Ventura County Sheriff's Office

- Mutual aid, counterterrorism, emergency or disaster preparedness and response, search and rescue.
- Evidence collection.
- Making public announcements. Examples can include:
  - Searching for a missing child
  - Emergency evacuation
- Mapping and photographing crime scenes, traffic collision scenes, or other areas as needed.
- Training and certification.

606.7 PROHIBITED USE

The UAS video surveillance equipment shall not be used:

- Generalized or random surveillance of persons or places unrelated to an authorized use.
- To target a person based solely on actual or perceived characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, economic status, age, cultural group, or disability.
- To harass, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual or group.
- To conduct personal business of any type.
- For the specific purpose of federal immigration enforcement.
- The UAS shall not be weaponized.

606.8 RETENTION OF UAS DATA

Data collected by the UAS shall be retained as provided in the established records retention schedule.

Department personnel shall not view, copy, download, share, post, release, or otherwise use non-public UAS media unless doing so is authorized by this Policy or applicable law and is part of their official duties.

Access to non-public media shall be limited to Department personnel and other persons approved by the Department for a legitimate Department purpose. Access shall be subject to appropriate controls, monitoring, and auditing.

The Department may share UAS data with another government agency only for a specific Department operation, authorized use, investigation, emergency, or legal requirement. Data shall not be shared if Department personnel have reason to believe it will be used for a prohibited purpose or in violation of this Policy.

The Department may not sell, or transfer data collected under this Policy to any private person, party, or company unless provided for by this Policy or required by law.

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/10/21, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by Ventura County Sheriff's Office

The Department will comply with Public Records Act (PRA) requests for data under this Policy in the same manner as it handles PRA requests for Body Worn Camera (BWC), except to the extent the Department has already published data sought by PRA on a public-facing portal.

606.9 DRONE AS FIRST RESPONDER OPERATIONS (DFR)

The Department's DFR aircraft are launched for limited duration, specific, authorized public safety missions. UAS will not loiter in order to passively collect data. UAS is not a generalized surveillance platform. DFR aircraft are not designed to collect facial recognition data or ALPR data for the purpose of creating a database.

The Department shall not, without a warrant or probable cause under an exception to the Fourth Amendment warrant requirement, attempt to compile a database of data collected by an UAS in such a manner that the whole of a person's physical movements can be ascertained over consecutive days.

Pilots shall record media only when the UAS arrives on scene, or the pilot determines evidentiary information can be gained by recording prior to arriving on scene. Recording shall be discontinued during the UAS' return flight to the dock.

The Department is committed to the transparent operation of its DFR program. In support of that objective, the Department will maintain a public-facing online transparency portal that publishes metadata associated with DFR flights. The Program Coordinator shall establish the required mission documentation, such as flight path, mission purpose, and identifying case or call information, and pilots will ensure UAS missions are documented accordingly.

Where appropriate, the Department may publish approved data, including media, to promote transparency, accountability, public understanding of the DFR program, and other legitimate Department purposes, including public relations, community outreach, press functions, or recruiting.

Additionally:

- The primary purpose of DFR is to respond to calls for service.
- Video surveillance equipment will be locked in a horizontal orientation when traveling to or returning from a call for service. Pilots may deviate from this orientation if the call involves a suspect who has fled the scene and the camera may assist in locating the suspect while responding to the call.
- DFR operations will fall under the direct supervision of the Patrol Watch Commander.
- All DFR flights will be logged and imported onto the transparency dashboard.
- System and personnel audits will be conducted on a regular basis.
- DFR will not be utilized for proactive enforcement.

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/10/21, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by Ventura County Sheriff's Office