

US Interior Department grounds Chinese-made drones

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A Mavic Pro 2 drone made by the Chinese company DJI

The US Department of the Interior has grounded its fleet of Chinese-made drones as it conducts a review of the program.

Nick Goodwin, an Interior Department spokesman, did not provide a reason for the decision but it comes amid US security concerns over Chinese electronics.

Goodwin said the review had been ordered by Interior Department Secretary David Bernhardt.

"Until this review is completed, the Secretary has directed that drones manufactured in China or made from Chinese components be grounded," he said.

Exceptions would be made for drones that are being used for emergency purposes such as fighting wildfires, search and rescue, and dealing with natural disasters, Goodwin said.

According to sources familiar with the program, the Interior Department has a fleet of 810 drones, almost all built by Chinese companies.

Only 24 are US-made and even those have Chinese electronic components, the sources said.

The US Department of Homeland Security issued a warning in May that Chinese-made drones could pose a security risk.

The United States has also taken steps against China's Huawei by effectively banning American companies from selling or transferring US technology to the Chinese telecoms giant.

US intelligence believes Huawei is backed by the Chinese military and that its equipment could provide Beijing's spy agencies with a backdoor into the communications networks of other countries.

China's foreign ministry said Friday that it was "still seeking further understanding of the specific situation" but called for the US to provide a "non-discriminatory environment for Chinese companies".

"We urge the US to stop abusing the concept of national security, stop exaggerating the so-called China threat, and stop oppressing Chinese companies without reason," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing.

The Chinese company DJI produces about 70 percent of the world's commercial drones.

"We're very disappointed," a DJI spokeswoman told AFP, adding that the company had no other comment for now.

The Pentagon has banned the military from using DJI drones for security reasons since 2017.

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