

# FAA Moves Toward Widespread U.S. Drone Flights

Joan Lowy, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A future in which unmanned drones are as common in U.S. skies as helicopters and airliners has moved a step closer to reality with a government request for proposals to create six drone test sites around the country.

The Federal Aviation Administration made the request Thursday, kicking off what is anticipated to be an intense competition between states hoping to win one of the sites.

The FAA also posted online a draft plan for protecting people's privacy from the eyes in the sky. The plan would require each test site to follow federal and state laws and make a privacy policy publicly available.

Privacy advocates worry that a proliferation of drones will lead to a "surveillance society" in which the movements of Americans are routinely monitored, tracked, recorded and scrutinized by the authorities.

The military has come to rely heavily on drones overseas. Now there is tremendous demand to use drones in the U.S. for all kinds of tasks that are too dirty, dull or dangerous for manned aircraft. Drones, which range from the size of a hummingbird to the high-flying Global Hawks that weigh about 15,000 pounds without fuel, also are often cheaper than manned aircraft. The biggest market is expected to be state and local police departments.

Industry experts predict the takeoff of a multibillion-dollar market for civilian drones as soon as the FAA completes regulations to make sure they don't pose a safety hazard to other aircraft.

Potential civilian users are as varied as the drones themselves. Power companies want them to monitor transmission lines. Farmers want to fly them over fields to detect which crops need water. Ranchers want them to count cows. Film companies want to use drones to help make movies. Journalists are exploring drones' newsgathering potential.

The FAA plans to begin integrating drones starting with small aircraft weighing less than about 55 pounds. The agency forecasts an estimated 10,000 civilian drones will be in use in the U.S. within five years.

The FAA is required by a law enacted a year ago to develop sites where civilian and military drones can be tested in preparation for integration into U.S. airspace that's currently limited to manned aircraft.

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The law also requires that the FAA allow drones wide access to U.S. airspace by 2015, but the agency is behind schedule on that.

The test sites are planned to evaluate what requirements are needed to ensure the drones don't collide with planes or endanger people or property on the ground. Remotely controlled drones don't have a pilot who can see other aircraft the way an onboard plane or helicopter pilot can.

There's also concern that links between drones and their on-the-ground operators can be broken or hacked, causing the operator to lose control of the aircraft.

"This research will give us valuable information about how best to ensure the safe introduction of this advanced technology into our nation's skies," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement.

The test sites are also expected to boost the local economy of the communities where they are located.

Customs and Border Patrol uses drones along the U.S.-Mexico border. And the FAA has granted several hundred permits to universities, police departments and other government agencies to use small, low-flying drones. For example, the sheriff's department in Montgomery County, Texas, has a 50-pound ShadowHawk helicopter drone intended to supplement its SWAT team.

The sheriff's department hasn't armed its drone, although the ShadowHawk can be equipped with a 40 mm grenade launcher and a 12-gauge shotgun. The prospect of armed drones patrolling U.S. skies has alarmed some lawmakers and their constituents. More than a dozen bills have been introduced in Congress and state legislatures to curb drone use and protect privacy.

President Barack Obama was asked Thursday about concerns that the administration believes it's legal to strike American citizens abroad with drones and whether that's allowed against citizens in the U.S.

"There's never been a drone used on an American citizen on American soil," the president said, speaking during an online chat sponsored by Google in which he was promoting his policy initiatives.

"We respect and have a whole bunch of safeguards in terms of how we conduct counterterrorism operations outside of the United States. The rules outside of the United States are going to be different than the rules inside the United States, in part because our capacity, for example, to capture terrorists in the United States are very different than in the foothills or mountains of Afghanistan or Pakistan."

He said he would work with Congress to make sure the American public understands "what the constraints are, what the legal parameters are, and that's something that I take very seriously."

Earlier this week, an FAA official told a meeting of potential test site bidders that

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aviation regulations prohibit dropping anything from an aircraft, which could be interpreted to bar arming civilian drones, according to an industry official present at the meeting who requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly.

**Source URL (retrieved on 11/25/2014 - 7:59pm):**

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