

John Goglia (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/johngoglia/>) Contributor

I write about the airline industry and aviation safety.

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LOGISTICS & TRANSPORTATION (LOGISTICS-TRANSPORTATION) 11/18/2014 @ 9:57AM | 3,060 views

NTSB Overturns Pirker Case: Finds For FAA That Drones Are Aircraft Subject To Its Rules

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The NTSB issued a much-awaited decision (<http://www.nts.gov/legal/pirker.html>) today that will surely be a disappointment to many drone enthusiasts, ruling that Federal Aviation Administration rules that apply to manned aircraft apply to unmanned aircraft or drones. The NTSB reversed a law judge's ruling in favor of Raphael Pirker and remanded the case for further proceedings. The issues on appeal boiled down to whether the small Zephyr model aircraft that was being flown by Mr. Pirker on the campus of the University of Virginia (<http://www.forbes.com/colleges/university-of-virginia-main-campus/>) was an aircraft for purposes of federal aviation regulations and whether it was subject to the prohibition on careless or reckless operation of aircraft.

The NTSB determined that the statutory language defining aircraft was broad enough to encompass unmanned aircraft. The definition of aircraft is "any contrivance invented, used, or designed to navigate, or fly in, the air." The NTSB further concluded that the FAA was within its regulatory rights to determine that the regulation prohibiting careless or reckless operations applied to unmanned aircraft just as it does to manned aircraft. In conclusion, the NTSB stated "this case calls upon us to ascertain a clear, reasonable definition of "aircraft" for purposes of the prohibition on careless and reckless operation in[the Federal Aviation Regulation]. We must look no further than



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the clear, unambiguous plain language [of the statute]" that an "aircraft" is any "device" used for flight in the air." The NTSB stated that this included "any aircraft, manned or unmanned, large or small."

The decision does not determine whether Mr. Pirker violated the regulations. That will be determined by the administrative law judge when the case is tried.

Mr. Pirker can appeal this case to the Court of Appeals. Since there is no chance of FAA drone rules being published in the near future, it is now up to Congress to determine whether it wants every model aircraft regardless of size to be regulated by the FAA's rules for manned aircraft.



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5224 College Road
Key West, FL 33040

Telephone: (305) 292-7190
FAX: (305) 292-7199

www.keysmosquito.org

September 15, 2014

Dear Mayor Cates and City Commissioners:

The Florida Keys Mosquito Control District (FKMCD) supports Commissioner Weekley's initiative to limit operations of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in airspace over Key West.

This is of great interest to the FKMCD because we regularly fly helicopters at very low altitudes, for several hours at a time, directly over the residential and business areas of Key West. FKMCD is currently flying helicopters for approximately 65 linear miles per mission, at approximately 75 feet above ground, while conducting aerial mosquito treatments over Key West to control domestic mosquitoes in and around homes. We're conducting these missions as often as every week during the rainy season. In addition, we also conduct numerous helicopter larvicide missions for nuisance mosquitoes elsewhere on the island (open marshes, tidal areas, right-of-ways, etc.) as rainfall and tidal changes mandate.

Our missions are flown well within the operational altitude of a UAS and far too close to the ground for our helicopters to see and avoid any UAS that may happen to pop up. Having a midair collision between a helicopter and a UAS would certainly create a disaster that would have far reaching impact on potential damage to property on the ground as well as potential loss of human life.

We realize the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has been working to ensure the safe integration of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in the National Airspace System (NAS). The FAA's sole mission and authority as it focuses on the integration of unmanned aircraft systems is safety.

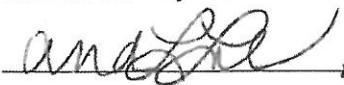
Already, the agency has achieved the first unmanned aircraft systems milestone included in the 2012 FAA reauthorization – streamlining the process for public agencies to safely fly UAS in the nation's airspace.

Federal, state and local government entities must obtain an FAA Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA) before flying any UAS in the NAS.

FKMCD has begun the process to obtain a COA for testing and evaluating potential use of drones to locate mosquito breeding sites in remote and difficult to access offshore islands. As part of the COA process we are currently prohibited from flying within 5 miles of an airfield and over congested housing areas. This incorporates all of Key West as a no fly zone for drones operated by Public Use Operators, Governmental agencies such as FKMCD, under an FAA COA.

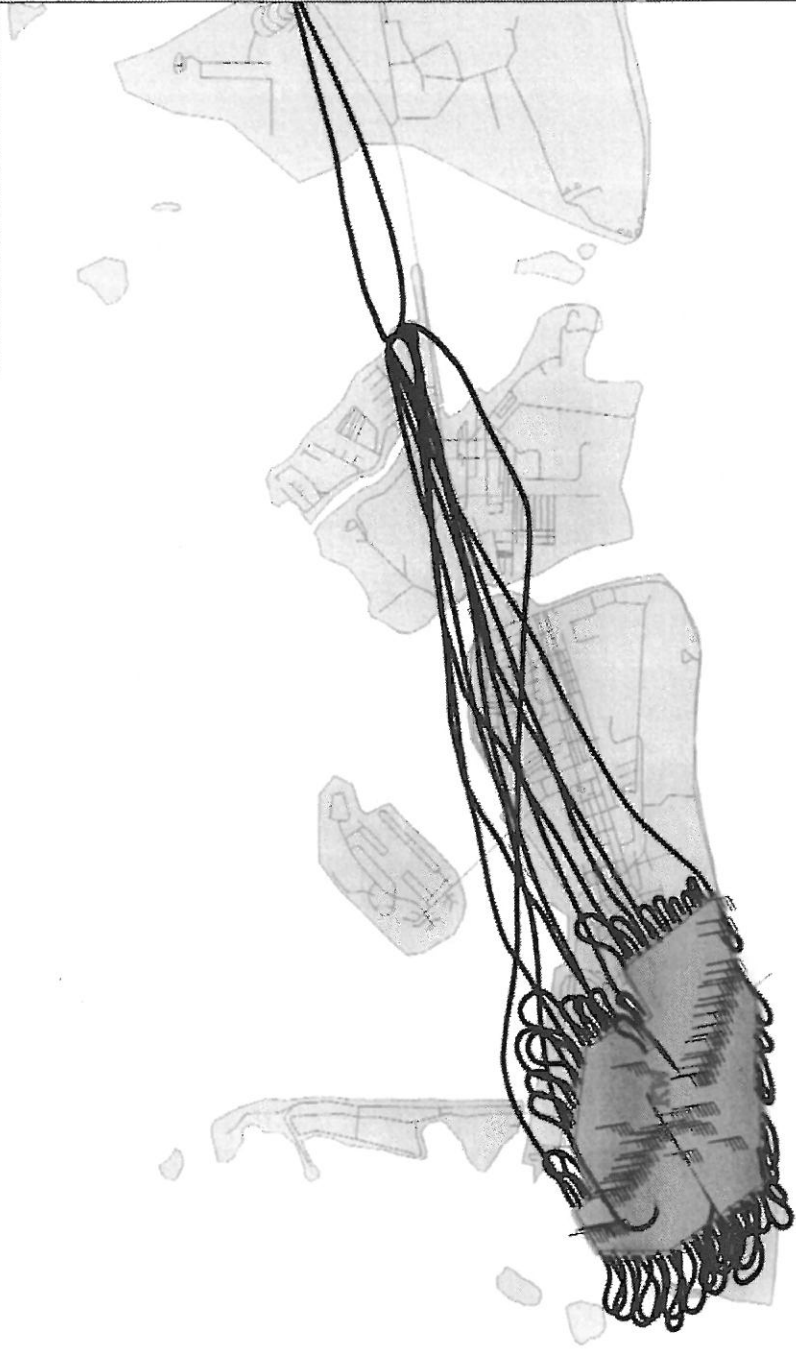
Unfortunately, The FAA does not have regulations pertaining to UAVs at this time. Until they do, it is the FKMCD belief that the airspace over Key West would be far safer by limiting UAS operations. Even though the FAA is working on this issue, should Key West pass an ordinance, they would be able to respond far more rapidly than the FAA could at this juncture in the FAA process to regulate the use of UAS.

We would recommend your proposed ordinance include language allowing the operation of UAS by "Public Use" entities such as the Key West Police Department and other organizations that fall within the "Public Use" definition.

 , for Michael Doyle

Michael S. Doyle, Executive Director

N173MS 09/04/14



LEGEND



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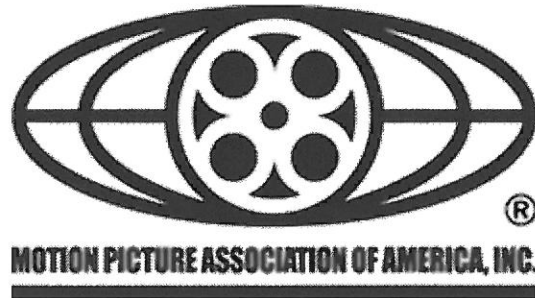


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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 25, 2014

**SENATOR DODD WELCOMES FAA APPROVAL OF OPERATOR EXEMPTIONS TO
USE SUAS FOR FILMING**

WASHINGTON — *The following is a statement from Senator Chris Dodd, Chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc., on today's announcement that the FAA has approved operator exemptions to use small unmanned aircraft systems for filming motion pictures and television:*

“Today’s announcement is a victory for audiences everywhere as it gives filmmakers yet another way to push creative boundaries and create the kinds of scenes and shots we could only imagine just a few years ago. Our industry has a history of successfully using this innovative technology overseas – making movies like “Skyfall” and “Transformers: Age of Extinction,” to name a couple – and we are proud to now be on the leading edge of its safe commercial use here at home. By creating a climate that further encourages more movie and TV production in the US, today’s decision also supports job creation and revenue growth around the country. I commend and thank Secretary Foxx, Administrator Huerta and everyone at the FAA for their leadership and commitment to achieving this great result.”

About the MPAA

The Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. (MPAA) serves as the voice and advocate of the American motion picture, home video and television industries from its offices in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Its members include: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures; Paramount Pictures Corporation; Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc.; Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation; Universal City Studios LLC; and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

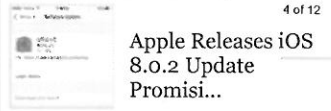
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For more information, contact:

Kate Bedingfield

(202) 293-1966

Kate_Bedingfield@mpaa.org



TECHNOLOGY

FAA Clears Six Film Companies to Use Drones

Decision Marks First Exemption of Their Kind From Ban on Commercial Drone Use

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By JACK NICAS CONNECT
Updated Sept. 25, 2014 7:23 p.m. ET



A drone on the set of the 2012 James Bond movie 'Skyfall' in Istanbul. *Flying-Cam*

The Federal Aviation Administration authorized six filmmaking companies to use unmanned aircraft for their work, a milestone for commercial drones in the U.S. that also points up the complexity of the government's effort to regulate the emerging industry.

The FAA's decision, announced Thursday, marked the first exemptions of their kind from the agency's virtual ban on the commercial use of unmanned aircraft. Previously, the FAA had approved two commercial-drone operations; both were for Alaskan oil operations.

The FAA has said the exemptions are a safe, interim way to relieve pent-up demand while the government works out a comprehensive policy governing the industry.

The FAA and others have raised safety concerns as commercial-drone use has increased rapidly over the past couple years despite the agency's ban. Drones aren't expected to be in widespread use in the U.S. until the agency completes rules for them, which is expected in the next several years.

But in the meantime, according to the latest comments by regulators, the FAA intends to encourage, and expects to approve, many more such operating requests from companies in other fields.

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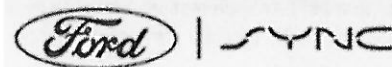
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Underlining the current regulatory jumble, some of the companies that received exemptions Thursday already had flown the aircraft as part of their work in the



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Professors Oppose U.S. Curb on Commercial Drone Use
Widespread Commercial Drone Flights 'Years Away'

U.S., in violation of the ban, according to the companies or their websites. Many other companies use drones commercially—in real estate, agriculture

and other businesses—according to drone makers and users.

The vehicles have been popular among producers of films and commercials, in part because they can fly in a sweet spot for filming that is too low for helicopters and too high for cranes, said Preston Ryon, co-owner of Snaproll Media LLC, one of the newly approved companies.

Mr. Ryon said his company started using drones to film country-music videos in its hometown of Nashville, but halted those operations in the U.S. about a year ago in response to the FAA's ban. Snaproll has since turned down dozens of jobs, he said.

"We shot 'Fast & Furious 6' over in Moscow, and we've been up in Canada," said Mr. Ryon, a former corporate-jet pilot who founded Snaproll four years ago. "But quite honestly we're excited to be back in the U.S. and working."

He said the exemption process is an important step toward common-sense regulations. "The rules and regulations need to happen because it's kind of a free-for-all right now," he said.

The FAA has said new drone rules will take time because of the complex safety issues raised by thousands of new vehicles using the nation's airspace.

The agency has faced increasing pressure from the private sector and some lawmakers over its existing policy.

The FAA has required its approval for all nonrecreational drone flights, but the certification process is similar to that for manned aircraft, which many drone companies say is too time-consuming and expensive.

In May, the FAA said it would consider requests for exemptions, particularly for uses in controlled environments away from populated areas, such as in filmmaking, crop monitoring and power-plant inspections.

The FAA said it is evaluating requests from 48 companies, including [Amazon.com Inc.](#), [AMZN -1.25%](#) which wants to test prototype delivery drones at its Seattle headquarters. The regulator had been expected to exempt seven film companies from its ban, but it asked one of them for more information.

Chris Dodd, chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America, told reporters Thursday that the FAA's exemptions mark "an important day for the [film] industry," adding that they help "create a climate where more production is done at home."

FAA chief Michael Huerta reiterated the need to balance public safety with industry demands to use unmanned aircraft. But he made clear that more exemptions are coming, saying the new approvals create a model for other industries. "We are open to receiving petitions from anyone," he said during a teleconference with reporters.

The FAA and the film companies agreed on a set of conditions that the agency said ensured that drone operations wouldn't compromise safety.

Those conditions include that the operators are certified private pilots of manned aircraft, that the drones are inspected before each flight, and that the pilots keep the vehicles within sight. They also restrict the companies' drone operations to daytime.

Tony Carmean, co-owner of San Diego-based Aerial MOB LLC, another of the exempted firms, said his company stopped using drones in the U.S. when it applied for the exemption in May. He applauded the FAA for incorporating input from companies, which suggested many of the restrictions that come with the exemptions.

"This whole exemption process has been about safety, safety, safety," he said. "We helped write these rules, and we're the experts in this technology."

The seventh company that had been expected to win an exemption was Flying-Cam Inc. Haik Gazarian, its director of operations, said Flying-Cam used drones to shoot movies in the U.S. from 1994 to 2011, when it halted operations in the country in response to the FAA policy. "We've had to downgrade and lay off people," he said.

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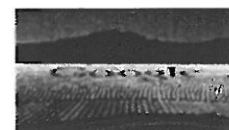
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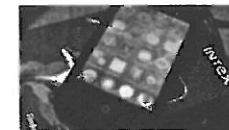
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"We shoot a lot of films all around the globe to keep us surviving." In 2014, the company won an Academy Award for the development of its filmmaking drone.

Tom Hallman said his company, Pictorvision Inc., has yet to use drones in the U.S., sticking to its main business of shooting video from helicopters. That put the company "at a huge disadvantage," he said. "People were and are absolutely using these things" in the U.S.

The other companies that received the exemptions were Astraeus Aerial, HeliVideo Productions LLC and RC Pro Productions Consulting LLC.

—Andy Pasztor
contributed to this article.

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Academy of Model Aeronautics National Model Aircraft Safety Code

Effective January 1, 2014

- A. **GENERAL:** A model aircraft is a non-human-carrying aircraft capable of sustained flight in the atmosphere. It may not exceed limitations of this code and is intended exclusively for sport, recreation, education and/or competition. All model flights must be conducted in accordance with this safety code and any additional rules specific to the flying site.
1. Model aircraft will not be flown:
 - (a) In a careless or reckless manner.
 - (b) At a location where model aircraft activities are prohibited.
 2. Model aircraft pilots will:
 - (a) Yield the right of way to all human-carrying aircraft.
 - (b) See and avoid all aircraft and a spotter must be used when appropriate. (AMA Document #540-D.)
 - (c) Not fly higher than approximately 400 feet above ground level within three (3) miles of an airport without notifying the airport operator.
 - (d) Not interfere with operations and traffic patterns at any airport, heliport or seaplane base except where there is a mixed use agreement.
 - (e) Not exceed a takeoff weight, including fuel, of 55 pounds unless in compliance with the AMA Large Model Airplane program. (AMA Document 520-A.)
 - (f) Ensure the aircraft is identified with the name and address or AMA number of the owner on the inside or affixed to the outside of the model aircraft. (This does not apply to model aircraft flown indoors.)
 - (g) Not operate aircraft with metal-blade propellers or with gaseous boosts except for helicopters operated under the provisions of AMA Document #555.
 - (h) Not operate model aircraft while under the influence of alcohol or while using any drug that could adversely affect the pilot's ability to safely control the model.
 - (i) Not operate model aircraft carrying pyrotechnic devices that explode or burn, or any device which propels a projectile or drops any object that creates a hazard to persons or property.
Exceptions:
 - Free Flight fuses or devices that burn producing smoke and are securely attached to the model aircraft during flight.
 - Rocket motors (using solid propellant) up to a G-series size may be used provided they remain attached to the model during flight. Model rockets may be flown in accordance with the National Model Rocketry Safety Code but may not be launched from model aircraft.
 - Officially designated AMA Air Show Teams (AST) are authorized to use devices and practices as defined within the Team AMA Program Document. (AMA Document #718.)
 - (j) Not operate a turbine-powered aircraft, unless in compliance with the AMA turbine regulations. (AMA Document #510-A.)
 3. Model aircraft will not be flown in AMA sanctioned events, air shows or model demonstrations unless:
 - (a) The aircraft, control system and pilot skills have successfully demonstrated all maneuvers intended or anticipated prior to the specific event.
 - (b) An inexperienced pilot is assisted by an experienced pilot.
 4. When and where required by rule, helmets must be properly worn and fastened. They must be OSHA, DOT, ANSI, SNELL or NOCSAE approved or comply with comparable standards.
- B. **RADIO CONTROL (RC)**
1. All pilots shall avoid flying directly over unprotected people, vessels, vehicles or structures and shall avoid endangerment of life and property of others.
 2. A successful radio equipment ground-range check in accordance with manufacturer's recommendations will be completed before the first flight of a new or repaired model aircraft.
 3. At all flying sites a safety line(s) must be established in front of which all flying takes place. (AMA Document #706.)
 - (a) Only personnel associated with flying the model aircraft are allowed at or in front of the safety line.
 - (b) At air shows or demonstrations, a straight safety line must be established.
 - (c) An area away from the safety line must be maintained for spectators.
 - (d) Intentional flying behind the safety line is prohibited.
 4. RC model aircraft must use the radio-control frequencies currently allowed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Only individuals properly licensed by the FCC are authorized to operate equipment on Amateur Band frequencies.
 5. RC model aircraft will not knowingly operate within three (3) miles of any pre-existing flying site without a frequency-management agreement. (AMA Documents #922 and #923.)
 6. With the exception of events flown under official AMA Competition Regulations, excluding takeoff and landing, no powered model may be flown outdoors closer than 25 feet to any individual, except for the pilot and the pilot's helper(s) located at the flightline.
 7. Under no circumstances may a pilot or other person touch an outdoor model aircraft in flight while it is still under power, except to divert it from striking an individual.
 8. RC night flying requires a lighting system providing the pilot with a clear view of the model's attitude and orientation at all times. Hand-held illumination systems are inadequate for night flying operations.
 9. The pilot of an RC model aircraft shall:
 - (a) Maintain control during the entire flight, maintaining visual contact without enhancement other than by corrective lenses prescribed for the pilot.
 - (b) Fly using the assistance of a camera or First-Person View (FPV) only in accordance with the procedures outlined in AMA Document #550.
 - (c) Fly using the assistance of autopilot or stabilization system only in accordance with the procedures outlined in AMA Document #560.
- C. **FREE FLIGHT**
1. Must be at least 100 feet downwind of spectators and automobile parking when the model aircraft is launched.
 2. Launch area must be clear of all individuals except mechanics, officials, and other fliers.
 3. An effective device will be used to extinguish any fuse on the model aircraft after the fuse has completed its function.
- D. **CONTROL LINE**
1. The complete control system (including the safety thong where applicable) must have an inspection and pull test prior to flying.
 2. The pull test will be in accordance with the current Competition Regulations for the applicable model aircraft category.
 3. Model aircraft not fitting a specific category shall use those pull-test requirements as indicated for Control Line Precision Aerobatics.
 4. The flying area must be clear of all utility wires or poles and a model aircraft will not be flown closer than 50 feet to any above-ground electric utility lines.
 5. The flying area must be clear of all nonessential participants and spectators before the engine is started.



**Federal Aviation
Administration**

Busting Myths about the FAA and Unmanned Aircraft

?



February 26—There are a lot of misconceptions and misinformation about unmanned aircraft system (UAS) regulations. Here are some common myths and the corresponding facts.

Myth #1: The FAA doesn't control airspace below 400 feet

Fact—The FAA is responsible for the safety of U.S. airspace from the ground up. This misperception may originate with the idea that manned aircraft generally must stay at least 500 feet above the ground

Myth #2: Commercial UAS flights are OK if I'm over private property and stay below 400 feet.

Fact—The FAA published a [Federal Register notice \(PDF\)](#) in 2007 that clarified the agency's policy: You may not fly a UAS for commercial purposes by claiming that you're operating according to the Model Aircraft guidelines (below 400 feet, 3 miles from an airport, away from populated areas.) Commercial operations are only authorized on a case-by-case basis. A commercial flight requires a certified aircraft, a licensed pilot and operating approval. To date, only one operation has met these criteria, using Insitu's ScanEagle, and authorization was limited to the Arctic. (<http://www.faa.gov/news/updates/?newsId=73981>)

Myth #3: Commercial UAS operations are a "gray area" in FAA regulations.

Fact—There are no shades of gray in FAA regulations. Anyone who wants to fly an aircraft—manned or unmanned—in U.S. airspace needs some level of FAA approval. Private sector (civil) users can obtain an experimental airworthiness certificate to conduct research and development, training and flight demonstrations. Commercial UAS operations are limited and require the operator to have certified aircraft and pilots, as well as operating approval. To date, only two UAS models (the Scan Eagle and Aerovironment's Puma) have been certified, and they can only fly in the Arctic. Public entities (federal, state and local governments, and public universities) may apply for a Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA)

The FAA reviews and approves UAS operations over densely-populated areas on a case-by-case basis.

Flying model aircraft solely for hobby or recreational reasons does not require FAA approval. However, hobbyists are advised to operate their aircraft in accordance with the agency's model aircraft guidelines (see Advisory Circular 91-57). In the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (Public Law 112-95, Sec 336), Congress exempted model aircraft from new rules or regulations provided the aircraft are operated "in accordance with a community-based set of safety guidelines and within the programming of a nationwide community-based organization."

The FAA and the Academy of Model Aeronautics recently signed a first-ever agreement that formalizes a working relationship and establishes a partnership for advancing safe model UAS operations. This agreement also lays the ground work for enacting the model aircraft provisions of Public Law 112-95, Sec 336. Modelers operating under the provisions of P.L. 112-95, Sec 336 must comply with the safety guidelines of a nationwide community-based organization.

Myth #4: There are too many commercial UAS operations for the FAA to stop.

Fact—The FAA has to prioritize its safety responsibilities, but the agency is monitoring UAS operations closely. Many times, the FAA learns about suspected commercial UAS operations via a complaint from the public or other businesses. The agency occasionally discovers such operations through the news media or postings on internet sites. When the FAA discovers apparent unauthorized UAS operations, the agency has a number of enforcement tools available to address these operations, including a verbal warning, a warning letter, and an order to stop the operation.

Reuters

By Alwyn Scott
12/12/2014

Drone downer: Will new FAA rules ground recreational fliers?

Americans shopping for toy remote-controlled airplanes or helicopters may find, sometime in the near future, that they come with unexpected accessories: A raft of new regulations.

The Federal Aviation Administration, by the end of the month, is expected to propose new rules governing small unmanned aircraft systems, the first major overhaul of its drone policy.

The agency is closely guarding details, saying only that the rules will cover a wide range of users flying aircraft or drones weighing 55 pounds or less.

But legal and policy experts who have advised the FAA and lobbied on drone regulations said they predict the new regulations will include restrictions on hundreds of thousands of people who fly quad-copters or toy planes in parks or backyards.

The focus on toy aircraft is a new twist. Such regulations have been in the works for years, largely because of pressure from businesses wanting to use drones for tasks such as aerial photography.

Experts said that based on existing drone guidelines, the new FAA rules, expected to take at least a year to kick in, will likely require, among other things, recreational fliers to either join a community-based model aircraft organization - or obtain authorization from the FAA. The rules also could place other restrictions on people who fly drones recklessly, the experts said. If the rules omit discussion of recreational fliers, the experts added, that could sow confusion on what type of flying is allowed.

"There's basically going to be two options," said Richard Hanson, director of government affairs at the Academy of Model Aeronautics, who has lobbied Congress and advised the FAA on drone regulations. "You either participate in a community-based organization or you have to follow the rules as if you are commercial operator."

RISKY FLIERS



© REUTERS/Carlo Allegri/Files A small drone helicopter operated by a paparazzi records singer Beyonce Knowles-Carter (not seen) as she rides the Cyclone rollercoaster while filming a music video on Coney Island

Bona-fide hobbyists have gotten little attention, largely because Congress in 2012 exempted them from new FAA rules - provided they adhere to, among other things, the safety code of a community-based organization, such as AMA, which has more than 170,000 members.

But that carve-out doesn't apply to an estimated 300,000 people in the U.S. who have bought toy aircraft and are largely unaware of hobbyist association safety codes.

These casual fliers, including people who get a toy drone as a holiday gift, are blamed for dangerous flights near airports, stadiums and military bases. The FAA recently documented more than 190 close calls, including instances of drones flying within 50 feet of jetliners landing in New York and elsewhere.

"Unfortunately, there are lots of people who've bought these things at the local store or online who don't know anything about the AMA or its safety guidelines," said Ted Ellett, a former FAA chief counsel and head of the unmanned aircraft systems group at law firm Hogan Lovells in Washington, D.C.

In the absence of rules, the FAA has largely relied on local and state police to prosecute risky drone fliers.

GOING SOFT?

Experts say it makes little sense for the FAA to be softer on hobbyists than on commercial fliers, who have an interest in flying responsibly to avoid lawsuits and protect their brands.

By Alwyn Scott
12/22/2014
"Drones are far surpassing the flying skills of the people who have them," said Paul Fraidenburgh, an aviation lawyer at Buchalter Nemer in Irvine, California. "The fact that someone is receiving money makes me feel safer about their operation."

Ellett, the former FAA chief counsel, said the FAA should issue clear definitions for flights that are exempt from the new rules - and those that are not. Otherwise, he added, confusion will be the order of the day.

The AMA has lobbied for the hobbyist exemption, arguing its members have an 80-year history of safe piloting, even with planes that are fitted with jet engines and can zoom at 200 miles an hour, the AMA's Hanson said. Those enthusiasts are not the toy-flying amateurs who order a quad-copter from Amazon.com Inc that experts expect the FAA's new rule to address.

Hanson served on an FAA advisory group that recommended light regulation for drones weighing a pound or two but would ratchet up requirements for flying aircraft of greater size and power. He said his understanding of current FAA policy suggests the agency won't provide that kind of stepped regulation.

The AMA's safety code covers items the FAA has said should apply to hobbyists: not flying carelessly or recklessly, avoiding prohibited areas, staying below 400 feet, keeping clear of manned aircraft and not "flying directly over unprotected people." The AMA's \$58 annual membership fee includes \$2.5 million in liability insurance.

The FAA said at a congressional hearing on Wednesday it is trying to educate recreational fliers about safe flight, recognizing that final rules are at least a year away. In the same vein, Amazon has linked its online "drone store" to the AMA, the FAA and other sites with safety information.

(Reporting by Alwyn Scott, editing by Hank Gilman)

FAA: Near-collisions between drones and airliners spike

Published November 27, 2014

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FAA: Surge in near-collisions between planes and drones

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WASHINGTON – After decades of steady improvements in air travel, a new report from the Federal Aviation Administration shows a surge in near-collisions between commercial airliners and drones.

Already this month, close calls have been reported from New Jersey to Kansas to Hawaii.

Since July 1, commercial airlines, private pilots and air-traffic controllers have reported 25 incidents to the FAA in which small drones came dangerously close to crashing into larger planes, according to the report.

Many of the calls happened during takeoff and landings at some of the nation's busiest airports including New York's LaGuardia Airport, Washington's Reagan National Airport and Dulles International Airport in northern Virginia. The spike in near collisions presents a new threat to aviation safety after years of improvement, the report says.

In one case, air-traffic controllers at LaGuardia reported that Republic Airlines Flight 6230 was "almost hit" by a drone flying at an altitude of 4,000 feet as a passenger plane was trying to land.

On Sept. 8, three different regional airlines – Express Jet, Chautauqua and Pinnacle – reported "very close calls" with a drone within minutes of each other as they were preparing to land at LaGuardia.

In many cases, the drones weigh less than 10 pounds, are plastic, have cameras and are measure just a few feet in diameter. Safety experts caution that the drones could get sucked into a jet engine or hit a plane's propeller.

"The potential for catastrophic damage is certainly there," Fred Roggero, a retired Air Force major general who was in charge of aviation safety investigations for the service and now serves as a consultant to companies seeking to fly drones commercially, told The Washington Post.

Under current FAA regulations, small drones are allowed to legally fly under 400 feet and five miles from major airports or other restricted airspace.

In 2012, Congress ordered the FAA to safely integrate drones into national airspace but the process has been slow and is expected to take several years.

The Washington Post reports that since 2012, the FAA has been struggling to keep up with the thousands of small drones that have been sold in the United States over the past three years. The FAA lacks the manpower to police airports for the drones and only a handful of them and their operators have been apprehended across the country, the paper reports.