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Drone Rules Likely Still Years Away, Dragging on Industry's Growth - Wall Street Journal

By Andy Pasztor | Nov. 22, 2018 7:00 a.m. ET

The Federal Aviation Administration is significantly behind earlier schedules for crafting airborne-identification rules for drones, causing industry officials to worry the delay could stymie their most ambitious plans for years.

Federal authorities and advocates of unmanned aircraft agree that reliable remote-tracking methods are essential for rapid industry growth, in areas ranging from package deliveries to expanded industrial uses and video applications. Such features, expected to be a combination of hardware and software, would allow law-enforcement and national security officials to identify suspect or potentially hostile unmanned aircraft. But despite extensive company-government cooperation—spurred by White House pledges to fast-track decisions—trade-association leaders now see final FAA regulatory action stretching past the end of the decade. Some experts say 2022 is more likely.

That would be up to three years later than some of the agency's initial projections, and many months longer than a revised timetable the FAA and its parent agency, the U.S. Department of Transportation, shared informally just months ago.

"I'm not happy about it," said Brian Wynne, president and chief executive of the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, the industry's leading trade group. The process needs to move forward, he said in an interview, because so many commercial applications are in a holding pattern until new rules are approved.

The industry's frustration, expressed in recent interviews and formal recommendations by an FAA-chartered advisory group, partly stems from technical challenges. Delays also result from skepticism among some law-enforcement and national-security agencies about the safety or reliability of proposed airborne-identification systems. Commercial rivalries further impede consensus, extending the timeline.

Until such issues are resolved, industry proponents worry many promising market segments—including potentially lucrative applications that depend on flights beyond the sight of ground operators—will remain off-limits for commercial drones.

"There has been a process of kicking the can down the road," according to George Mathew, chairman and chief executive of Kespry Inc., a drone startup specializing in industrial and other applications.

The FAA could propose standard regulations as soon as this month that would allow small drones to fly over crowds and populated areas, with a preliminary proposal for remote identification rules expected to follow within months.

But the entire process is likely to take years, industry leaders say. Many anticipate such flight-over-people rules won't become final until in-flight identification requirements are issued. The situation, Mr. Wynne said, shows that the FAA's priorities are "a bit out of sequence."

An FAA spokesman said the rules will be designed to keep other aircraft and people on the ground safe.

"We have to get this right the first time," the spokesman said. "We are moving as quickly as possible to address the complex issues." The FAA was convinced it was on a good path in late 2017, with the goal of wrapping up the entire effort in a year or so. But in spring 2018, after senior Federal Bureau of Investigation officials balked at proposed safeguards and demanded tougher requirements to identify potential terrorists or hostile operators, FAA managers had to recast their proposal.

Consultant Jim Williams, the former head of the FAA's unmanned aerial systems office, compares identification standards to "an electronic license plate." But he said industry arguments continue to simmer over whether the best approach is to rely on sensors embedded in drones or to develop a hybrid, low-altitude traffic-control system that includes ground-based elements.

Financing some of the proposals may be difficult. The Trump administration is aggressively pursuing a deregulation agenda, and Mr. Williams said "they don't want any rules that will cost any money."

*Courtesy of the Wall Street Journal and written by Andy Pasztor

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