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FAA Seeks to Ease Air-Traffic Controllers' Stress From Drones - Wall Street Journal

By Andy Pasztor | Oct. 20, 2017 12:57 p.m. ET

With roughly 250 monthly encounters between drones and manned aircraft nationwide, automated procedures are being developed to reduce pressure on air-traffic controllers.

Operators of unmanned aircraft increasingly either fly close to U.S. airports without first obtaining required Federal Aviation Administration authorizations, or belatedly contact controllers to expedite requests for approvals, according to a recently released Federal Aviation Administration document. In some instances, the agency says, last-minute phone calls to airport towers entail "distractions for air traffic control management" while "creating a potential safety hazard."

To alleviate such problems, industry experts and federal safety regulators have joined forces to launch a computerized system later this year. The goal is to more easily and quickly give the green light to drone operations slated for closer than 5 miles to U.S. airports. Commercial flights in such airspace currently require manual approvals from the FAA to proceed, which typically can take months and has been a longstanding source of industry frustration.

More than 14,000 individual authorization requests are now pending and the FAA projects that unless the process is changed, the total backlog could climb to more than 25,000 by March 2018.

The FAA document posted in the Federal Register earlier this month also projected that switching to automated authorizations will reduce encounters between drones and manned aircraft by 30%, eliminating some 450 problematic events over the next six months. Most of the reported incidents don't pose an imminent threat to airliners or other manned aircraft, but monitoring and cataloging them uses controller resources.

Roughly four dozen airports may begin relying on the automated capability, which also will allow recreational drone users and operators of remote-controlled aircraft to notify controllers of upcoming flights in the proximity of airports.

Longer term, the initiative is part of the broader aim of promoting wider commercial applications of drones throughout U.S.

An FAA draft report emphasized that drone-services companies will be the primary intermediaries to operators, eliminating the need for additional agency spending. The FAA's website indicates the goal is to set up a data exchange permitting industry to "create the tools needed to benefit the drone community."

Eventually, the automated notification concept is slated to expand across the U.S. and provide a building block for what is expected to be an entirely separate, low-altitude traffic-control system geared toward drones and funded by the industry.

An FAA spokeswoman declined to elaborate, and the union representing U.S. controllers declined to comment.

Airports likely to participate in the prototype evaluation include those serving Miami, Cincinnati, San Jose, Phoenix and Anchorage, along with the Minneapolis regional traffic-control facility.

Potential controller distraction "has been an issue from the beginning" of FAA efforts to oversee unmanned aviation, according to consultant Jim Williams, former head of the agency's drone office. The latest data-sharing approach "is very smart and very innovative," he said.

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

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