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## Gatwick Incident Raises Questions Over Race to Commercialize Drones Regulations Wall Street Journal

By Robert Wall and Andy Pasztor | Dec. 21, 2018 3:34 p.m. ET

The quick development of pilotless aircraft has captivated throngs of industry executives with its possibilities, promising services like drone-based package delivery, rescue drones and drone taxi services.

For now, though, that commercial promise has been overshadowed at times by incidents like the one this week at the U.K.'s Gatwick Airport. Authorities have grounded flights off and on for three days, closing the runway all of Thursday after unauthorized drone operations nearby. Officials said it was a deliberate attempt to disrupt travel.

The fiasco struck at a time when companies such as Amazon.com Inc., Google parent Alphabet Inc. GOOGL +0.47% and others have bet big on drones. They are developing services as diverse as package delivery and communications broadcasting. Many of these companies, however, have little experience with the historically slow pace of crafting aviation rules. The Gatwick incident is a sobering reminder of the long road ahead to making such drone-based businesses a reality, without imperiling commercial flights.

"People have now started to realize how useful drones can be, but there has to be a good regulatory framework," said Marc Kegelaers, chief executive of Antwerp-based drone-air-traffic-management provider Unify NV.

Underscoring the push for a convergence between drones and airlines, DFS Aviation Services GmbH, a state-owned company that manages Germany's air traffic-control system, on Friday said it had agreed to buy a 23% stake in Unify. DFS Chief Executive Klaus-Dieter Scheurle called it a step toward "harmonious and safe coexistence of manned and unmanned aviation."

But experts see even partial integration as many years away, and dependent on technical leaps still on the drawing boards.

Some drone proponents worry the Gatwick incident could lead to regulatory backlash. The British Airline Pilots Association, which has long called for tighter rules for private drone use, this week called on the British government to increase to five kilometers (3.1 miles) from one kilometer the drone exclusion zone around an airport. It also called for drone licensing and registration requirements and for drones to be equipped with aircraftlike transponders so they can be tracked.

Nearly 80,000 registered commercial drones are flying in the U.S. already. That is projected to climb to 1.6 million by 2021. Industry officials envision that one day a single pilot might be controlling a flock of drones from long distances, possibly doing everything from crop dusting to inspecting railroad tracks.

Law-enforcement and security agencies have been ambivalent about many of the ambitions behind that vision. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation has said civilian drones pose a steadily escalating threat to U.S. security.

"Terrorist groups could easily export their battlefield experiences to use weaponized drones" against civilian targets, FBI Director Christopher Wray told a Senate panel in October.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration wants the FBI to sign off on proposed ways to remotely identify drones. The preliminary standard is scheduled to be released early next year.

"New aviation technologies are usually ahead of the regulatory framework," Patrick Ky, executive director of the European Aviation Safety Agency, the equivalent of the FAA, said this month. Basic parameters—such as how much noise and intrusion on privacy will citizens tolerate with expanded drone usage—need to be set against the economic benefit of new business opportunities before regulators can start to hand down design specs for commercial drones.

A split in the drone industry itself about how to proceed has made drafting rules more difficult. Proponents of recreational drones, led by China's DJI, the world's largest civilian drone maker, are pushing for relatively simple, onboard systems to identify operators and transmit location and other information to conventional cellphones or company-provided technology. Consultant Jim Williams, the former head of the FAA's drone integration office, compares it to an electronic license plate.

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

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