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Law Enforcement Concerns Slow Commercial Drone Regulations - Wall Street Journal

By Andy Pasztor | September 6, 2017

LAS VEGAS—Efforts to develop flight-safety regulations for commercial drones are being disrupted by law-enforcement and national security concerns, industry and government officials said at a conference here Wednesday.

Federal Aviation Administration draft rules intended to permit small unmanned aircraft to routinely fly over crowds were close to being published late last year, according to industry officials, but they were effectively vetoed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, along with other agencies, for failing to adequately address how to remotely identify such airborne vehicles.

In response, the FAA convened an advisory group of experts—slated to issue recommendations this month about possible technical solutions—and has continued discussions to try to resolve public safety issues raised by the FBI and other critics inside the government. But many industry officials are concerned the fallout threatens to complicate and further postpone, for many more months at least, the FAA's already delayed initiatives to open up significantly more airspace for booming drone applications. "The security issues have stopped a lot of stuff" the FAA and industry were counting on to promote drone flights at night and beyond the sight of ground-based operators, Gretchen West, a lawyer for Hogan Lovells US LLP, told one panel.

Amid projections that some seven million drones will be sold nationwide by 2020, industry frustration is growing about the FAA's slow pace. During presentations and on the sidelines of the InterDrone conference—featuring some 4,000 attendees from more than 50 countries—senior FAA and industry representatives talked in stark terms about the challenges of finding a way to reliably vet and track drones from a distance.

Jim Williams, the former head of the FAA's drone integration office who now represents industry clients, told another panel that the "security world has a say" in such deliberations and the central question remains: "How are we going to know the good guys from the bad guys" when it comes to a swarm of drones over a crowd?

Despite extensive work on the draft rule, Mr. Williams said that before the FBI weighed in with criticism, it "had never occurred to the FAA that it would be a problem."

In his most pointed public remarks yet on the matter, FAA chief Michael Huerta said in a keynote speech that the FAA is working with researchers and law-enforcement experts to ultimately "ensure safe and secure operations." Mr. Huerta said that "we all know that there are bad actors out there who want to use [drones] for nefarious purposes."

His comments follow a flurry of media and U.S. military reports, for instance, detailing Middle Eastern terror groups using weaponized drones against military and civilian targets in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

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

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