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Unlike Most Industries, Drone Makers and Operators Clamor for Federal Regulation - Wall Street Journal

By Andy Pasztor | September 17, 2017

Despite White House directives rolling back regulations affecting most industries, drone proponents are clamoring for more federal rules as the way to open up the skies for unmanned aircraft.

The counterintuitive stance stems from the fact that until roughly a year ago, commercial drones effectively were barred from U.S. airspace due to safety concerns. Since then, the Federal Aviation Administration has given limited approvals for small, remotely piloted aircraft weighing up to 55 pounds.

With some exceptions, the initial package of rules permits operations only during daylight hours, up to an altitude of 400 feet and within sight of operators on the ground.

But for many leaders of a budding industry that already has nearly 80,000 registered commercial drones in the U.S. and is projected to have 1.6 million by 2021, progress is too slow because the next wave of rules is still a year or two off. Considering the goal of having a single pilot control a flock of drones from long distance—possibly doing everything from dusting crops to inspecting railroad tracks—they see the FAA's current boundaries as unduly restrictive.

That is why drone makers, operators and many of their would-be customers are bucking the governmentwide trend toward looser oversight. Additional regulations are their sole means of getting a green light for a much broader array of promising uses.

So from packed conferences to congressional hearings to FAA-sponsored advisory committees, these contrarian voices argue that swift federal action is essential for the technology to flourish.

Unlike nearly all other businesses, "we want and need rules and regulations to understand how we can fly drones commercially for expanded operations," said Gretchen West, senior adviser at the law firm Hogan Lovells US LLP.

While the FAA, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies struggle with legal, technical and public safety challenges unlike any in the past, industry officials increasingly are frustrated. They worry that a prolonged regulatory stalemate threatens to stifle innovation, sacrifice potential American jobs and hand other countries the lead in evolving market segments.

The status quo will persist "until there are enough [drones] out there pushing the FAA to do something different" and the industry's prod- ding "rises to the level of bumping everything else out of the way," consultant Jim Williams, former head of the agency's drone office, said during a recent conference.

Responses to Hurricane Harvey's impact on Texas this month showcased the industry's potential. The FAA issued more than 125 authoriza- tions spanning various search and rescue missions, bridge inspections, flood monitoring and media flights—some going beyond what had been deemed acceptable under normal circumstances.

FAA chief Michael Huerta described it as a transformative moment, emphasizing that "every drone that flew meant that a traditional aircraft" was freed up to help save lives and "did not put additional strain on an already fragile infrastructure."

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

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