Congress told US lags other nations on drones

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In this March 12, 2014 file photo, a drone flies over the scene of an explosion that leveled two apartment buildings in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York. A government watchdog says commercial drone flights are taking off in other countries while the U.S. lags behind in developing safety regulations to would permit unmanned aircraft operations by a wide array of industries. The Government Accountability Office (GAO_ also estimated Wednesday in prepared congressional testimony that it will be nearly years or longer before the Federal Aviation Administration issues final rules to permit commercial use of small drones. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Commercial drone flights are taking off in other countries while the U.S. lags behind in developing safety regulations that would permit unmanned aircraft operations by a wide array of industries, witnesses told a House panel Wednesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration bars all commercial use of drones except for 13 companies that have been granted permits for limited operations. Permits for four of those companies were announced Wednesday, an hour before a hearing of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's aviation subcommittee. The four companies plan to use drones for aerial surveillance, construction site monitoring and oil rig flare stack inspections. The agency has received 167 requests for exemptions from commercial operators.

Several European countries have granted commercial permits to more than a 1,000 drone operators for safety inspections of infrastructure, such as railroad tracks, or to support commercial agriculture, Gerald Dillingham of the Government Accountability Office testified. Australia has issued more than 180 permits to businesses engaged in aerial surveying, photography and other work, but limits the permits to drones weighing less than 5 pounds. And small, unmanned helicopters have been used to monitor and spray crops in Japan for more than a decade.

Canada has had regulations governing the use of unmanned aircraft since 1996 and, as of September, had issued more than 1,000 permits this year alone, Dillingham said. Canada recently revised it regulations to grant blanket permission for flights of drones weighing less than 5 pounds. It also cleared the way for flights by drones weighing between about 5 pounds and 55 pounds as long as operators abide by certain restrictions.

The FAA has been working for years on developing safety rules to give small drones broader access to U.S. skies and agency officials have said they expect to propose regulations before the end of this month. But it

could be at least two or three years before regulations become final, Dillingham said.

"It ... concerns me that road builders in Germany and farmers in France today are enjoying economic benefits from (drones) because safety regulators there have found ways to permit such flights," said the subcommittee's chairman, Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-N.J. "I can't help but wonder if the Germans, French and Canadians can do some of these things today, then why can't we also be doing them?"

The U.S. has led the world in the development of drones, but FAA regulations are so restrictive that researchers trying to resolve key technology gaps in order to make commercial unmanned aircraft safer are at a disadvantage compared to colleagues in some other countries, said Nicholas Roy, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who has worked with Google on drone technology.

Even testing of drones in remote, unpopulated areas entails complying with onerous regulations in the U.S., while countries like the United Kingdom and Australia make allowances for flights in lightly populated areas, he said.

While U.S. researchers into unmanned aircraft haven't yet fallen behind, "there are issues and constraints that may allow other countries to overtake the U.S. both in developing the next generation of UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) technology and in training the next generation of UAV engineers," Roy said.

Earlier this week Amazon, which wants to deploy drones to deliver small packages, said FAA testing restrictions were so burdensome that the company is looking to do its research in other countries.

Peggy Gilligan, the FAA's associate administrator for safety, told the

committee that delays in issuing regulations for small drones are "beyond what any of us think acceptable," she but assured lawmakers they would see proposed regulations very soon.

In general, "we agree we need to speed this up a little bit," she said.

FAA officials frequently point out that there are far more planes and other aircraft in U.S. skies than in the skies of any other country, making the safe integration of drones a significant challenge. The FAA is receiving about 25 reports a month from pilots and others of drones flying in the vicinity of planes and airports, raising concern about the potential for collisions.

Lee Moak, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, brought a DJI Phantom—one of the most popular small drones on the market—with him to the subcommittee witness table. He told lawmakers he could stand in the courtyard of the House office building where the hearing was being held and fly the drone across the Potomac River and into the flight path of a plane landing at Washington Reagan National Airport. It's difficult for pilots to see small drones: They aren't equipped with technology to warn pilots of their presence; and they aren't visible on the radar screens of air traffic controllers, he said.

The permits announced Wednesday were granted to Trimble Navigation Limited, VDOS Global LLC, Clayco Inc. and Woolpert Inc., which received two permits. Previously the only permits the Federal Aviation Administrational Aviation had issued were to two oil companies in Alaska and seven aerial photography companies associated with television and film production.

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