

Poll: Americans skeptical of commercial drones (Update)

December 19 2014, byJoan Lowy And Jennifer Agiesta



In this March 12, 2014 file photo, a drone flown by Brian Wilson, prepares to land after flying over the scene of an explosion that leveled two apartment buildings in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York. Americans are deeply skeptical that the benefits of the heralded drone revolution will outweigh the risks to privacy and safety, although a majority approve of using small, unmanned aircraft in dangerous jobs or remote areas, according to a new Associated Press-GfK opinion poll. By a 2-to-1 margin, those polled said they oppose allowing use drones for commercial purposes. Only 21 percent favor commercial use of drones, while 43 percent oppose it. Another 35 percent were in the middle. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Americans broadly back tight regulations on commercial drone operators, according to a new Associated Press-GfK poll, as concerns about privacy and safety override the potential benefits of the heralded drone revolution.

The FAA is expected to propose restricting drones weighing less than 55 pounds to flights under 400 feet high, forbid nighttime flights, and require drones be kept within sight of their operators.

It also may require drone operators to get pilot's licenses, which would be controversial. Critics say the skills needed to fly a manned aircraft are different from those needed to operate a drone. But 64 percent support requiring the pilot's licenses, according to the poll, with more in favor of limiting drone flight altitude and requiring them to be kept within eyesight.

Eddy Dufault, 58, a machinist and part-time wildlife photographer in Marlborough, Massachusetts, who is considering buying a drone, said he agrees with most of the restrictions, but opposes licensing. It can cost would-be pilots \$15,000 for the needed flight training and practice flights, he said, adding it would be more appropriate to require operators to attend a few classes and pass a drone flight test.

It may be two or three years before the rules take effect, but once they do thousands are expected to buzz U.S. skies. With a few narrow exceptions, the Federal Aviation Administration currently prohibits commercial use of drones.

Congress may also step in next year to try to nudge the FAA to move faster. Drones are forecast to create 100,000 jobs and \$82 billion in economic impact in the first 10 years they're allowed, according to the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, a trade group.

By a 2-1 margin, the poll found, those who had an opinion opposed using drones for commercial purposes. Only 21 percent favored commercial use of drones, compared with 43 percent opposed. Another 35 percent were in the middle.

Only 3 percent of people say they've operated small drones, which are essentially the same as remote-controlled model aircraft.

Support for using commercial drones was the weakest among women and seniors, while college graduates and wealthier people were more apt to favor it.

Elliot Farber, 26, said drones are just the latest technological advancement and he doesn't understand why anyone would oppose them.

"It's really wild to think about it," said Farber, who works in a casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey. "It's literally something you would see in a movie and now they're talking about it like it's a true possibility. I think it's inevitable it will happen. I think it's a great thing."

But Roberta Williams, 66, said she doesn't believe "the average person should be allowed to just go out and get one to do whatever they want to do with it." She worries people will put guns or other weapons on them and use them for sinister purposes.

The reliability of drones is another concern. "This is still a remote-control vehicle, and those things go amok," said Williams, a retired nonprofit organization manager who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Still, the survey showed many Americans see value in the use of drones for certain tasks, such as inspecting oil platforms and bridges. Majorities also said they favor using drones to help map terrain through aerial photography, and to monitor wildlife.

But—Amazon take note—only 1 in 4 thinks using drones to deliver small packages is a good idea. Thirty-nine percent were opposed, and 34 percent were neutral on that question. Nearly the same share opposed using drones to take photographs or videos at weddings and other private events. A third opposed allowing farmers to use drones to spray crops, while another third supported it. Only 23 percent said they favored the recreational use of small drones.

Ramona Jones, 65, said that if Amazon uses drones to deliver packages as it has proposed, delivery services like UPS, FedEx and the postal service won't be far behind. She envisions skies crowded with drones running into each other and raining debris on people below.

"It sounds futuristic, but how are they going to manage that?" said Jones, of Austin, Texas. "Just like we have cars on the highway ... somebody is still going to hit somebody else."

Robert Waters, 54, a history professor at Ohio Northern University, said he favors commercial use of drones but has misgivings.

"They could definitely improve people's lives," he said. "Of course, they could also make them miserable with the kind of spying that people could do on each other. It's a double-edged sword."

Nearly three-fifths of those polled said they were extremely or very concerned that private operators could use drones in a way that violates privacy.

"There are people who are going to abuse it no matter what you do," Dufault, the photographer, said, "but 99.9 percent of them won't."

The poll of 1,010 adults was conducted online Dec. 4-8, using a sample drawn from GfK's probability-based KnowledgePanel, which is designed

to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

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Citation: Poll: Americans skeptical of commercial drones (Update) (2014, December 19) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-poll-americans-skeptical-commercial-drones.html>

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