

Obama sees need to move on drone rules now (Update)

January 27 2015, by Josh Lederman And Calvin Woodward



This handout photo provided by the US Secret Service shows the drone that crashed onto the White House grounds in Washington, Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A small drone flying low to the ground crashed onto the White House grounds before dawn Monday, triggering a major emergency response and raising fresh questions about security at the presidential mansion. A man later came forward to say he was responsible and didn't mean to fly it over the complex. The man contacted the Secret Service after reports of the crash spread in the media, a U.S. official said. The man told the agency that he had been flying the drone recreationally. The man is a Washington resident and is cooperating with investigators. (AP Photo/US Secret Service)

President Barack Obama says the wayward quadcopter that crashed on the White House grounds—flown by an off-duty intelligence employee—shows that the U.S. must take steps to ensure commercial and consumer drones are used safely.

It's his own administration that has lagged on the matter. Both Congress and the drone industry have pressed for rules and clarification as the technology of civilian drone use grows apace and the small unmanned craft become ever cheaper.

Obama, in a CNN interview from India, likened the 2-foot-long quadcopter that crashed on the White House lawn to one that could be bought at Radio Shack, which lists them from \$50 to \$700.

"We don't yet have the legal structures and the architecture both globally and within individual countries to manage them the way that we need to," Obama said Tuesday. Part of his job in his final two years in office "is seeing if we can start providing some sort of framework that ensures that we get the good and minimize the bad."

The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency said Tuesday the man, still unidentified, is one of its employees. His work has nothing to do with drones, the agency said in a statement, adding, "Even though the employee was using a personal item while off duty, the agency takes the incident very seriously and remains committed to promoting public trust and transparency."

The agency supplies map-based and related intelligence to the Pentagon and other national security operations.



Members of the Secret Service search the grounds of the North Lawn of the White House in Washington, Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the White House grounds during the middle of the night while President Barack Obama and first lady were in India. It was unclear whether their daughters, Sasha and Malia, were at home at the time of the incident with their grandmother, Marian Robinson. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

The crash set off a White House lockdown. The man stepped forward hours later and appeared to convince investigators that he meant no harm with the extraordinary breach of presidential security—and of existing rules for drone flights—and that he did not mean the drone to go where it did. His employer said the Secret Service investigation continues.

The errant flight pointed to vulnerabilities in defending against small, low-flying threats as well as the risks, already becoming common, of hobbyist drones going astray in populated places or near airports.

The Federal Aviation Administration, pressed by Congress, had wanted to release proposed rules for small drones by the end of 2014. To the dismay of the drone industry, that process is now dragging into 2015. Even after rules are proposed, it is likely to be two or three years before regulations become final.

As it now stands, hobbyists can fly drones if they keep them under 400 feet in altitude, 5 miles from an airport, always within sight and not within a highly populated area. Commercial use is largely banned, with only a small number of companies permitted to use them for inspections and aerial photography.

Lethal drones have become an important part of the U.S. arsenal, used to attack enemy positions. Their civilian cousins can be used for inspecting crops and weather conditions, conducting surveillance in other many forms and even delivering packages. "Incredibly useful functions," Obama said.



Secret Service officers search the south grounds of the White House in Washington, Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A device, possibly an unmanned aerial

drone, was found on the White House grounds during the middle of the night while President Barack Obama and the first lady were in India, but his spokesman said Monday that it posed no threat. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Congress wanted rules for small drones in place last year and a larger framework by this September. The FAA has been waiting for the White House to approve a proposal for rules that would clear the way for small, commercial drones flights. Regulations for larger drones aren't expected anytime soon.

Separately, the White House has been working on an executive order to address privacy issues raised by drones and had expected to release that order six months ago. But that has not happened.

Obama told CNN's Fareed Zakaria he's "assigned some of the relevant agencies to start talking to stakeholders and figure out how we're going to put an architecture in place that makes sure that these things aren't dangerous and that they're not violating people's privacy."



This image made with an iPhone shows emergency vehicles surrounding the southeast corner of the White House complex, near the main Treasury building, right, after a device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the lawn early in the morning Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. (AP Photo/Nedra Pickler)



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