

FAA streamlines rules to speed up permits to fly drones (Update)

March 24 2015, byJoan Lowy

Federal aviation officials, battered by complaints that bureaucratic hurdles are preventing industry from realizing the economic benefits of drones, announced Tuesday they are streamlining rules to expedite permits to fly small, commercial unmanned aircraft.

The Federal Aviation Administration made the announcement an hour before a congressional hearing at which an Amazon.com executive complained that the agency took too long to approve a request to flight test a delivery drone. The model of drone was already obsolete when the request was finally granted last week.

Drone industry officials have complained that FAA's restrictions on testing are forcing U.S. companies to do their testing overseas and giving foreign competitors a leg up.

"We don't test it anymore. We've moved on to more advanced designs that we already are testing abroad," said Paul Misener, Amazon's vice president for global public policy at a hearing of the Senate Commerce, Science and Technology's aviation subcommittee.

Amazon submitted a new request to the FAA last Friday—the day after the previous request was granted—for permission to test fly a more advanced drone, Misener said. "We are hopeful that this permission will be granted quickly," he said.

The company is also asking FAA for permission "to rapidly modify our

test vehicles without administrative delays associated with every change," Misener said.

By contrast, European regulators are "enthusiastically pursuing" an approach that is "eminently reasonable" and "mindful of the tremendous opportunities for innovation and economic benefits" that drones present, he said.

FAA officials have been cautious about granting permission both to companies who want to test drones for future operations like Amazon and to companies that want to use drones now. Agency officials have said their tight restrictions are necessary to prevent collisions between drones and manned aircraft, especially since drones don't show up on radar and drone operators have limited ability to "see and avoid" other aircraft.

Last year, the FAA began granting permits on a case-by-case basis to companies that want to use drones for aerial photography, to monitor crops and pipelines, and to inspect bridges, cell phone towers, oil platforms and other tall structures, among other uses. But the agency has a backlog of nearly 700 permit applications, and the list is growing.

Under the streamlined rules, the FAA will grant blanket flying permission to applicants whose drones weigh less than 55 pounds and who agree to keep flights under 200 feet, to fly only in the daytime, and to keep away from airports.

The permits FAA has granted thus far also require operators to keep drones within line of sight of operators. That severely limits the distance drones can fly and would prevent the kind of deliveries Amazon envisions.

Amazon wants to use drones weighing less than 50 pounds to deliver

small packages to customers within 30 minutes or less. That would entail flying "distances of 10 miles or more, well beyond visual line of sight," Misener said.

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