

US announces test sites for drone aircraft (Update)

December 30 2013, by Michelle Rindels



This Sept. 2013 file photo shows The Reaper drone, now known as a Global Hawk, at Edwards Air Force Base in California. The Federal Aviation Administration announced six states on Monday Dec. 30, 2013, that will develop test sites for drones, a critical next step for the march of the unmanned aircraft into U.S. skies. Alaska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia will host the research sites, the agency said. (AP Photo/ Las Vegas Sun, Richard Velotta, File)

The U.S. government announced six states on Monday that will develop test sites for drones, a critical next step for the march of the unmanned

aircraft into American skies.

Alaska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia will host the research sites, providing diverse climates, geography and air traffic environments, Federal Aviation Administration administrator Michael Huerta said.

Drones have been mainly used by the military, but governments, businesses, farmers and others are making plans to join the market. Many universities are starting or expanding drone programs.

The Federal Aviation Administration does not currently allow commercial use of drones, but it is working to develop operational guidelines by the end of 2015, although officials concede the project may take longer than expected.

The FAA projects some 7,500 commercial drones could be aloft within five years of getting widespread access to American airspace.

Representatives from winning states were jubilant about the FAA announcement and the likelihood that the testing will draw companies interested in cashing in on the fledgling industry.

"This is wonderful news for Nevada that creates a huge opportunity for our economy," said U.S. Sen. Harry Reid from Nevada, a Democrat.

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, called the announcement a "slam dunk" for central and northern New York.

The competition for a test site was robust, Huerta said, as 25 entities in 24 states submitted proposals. At least one of the six sites chosen will be up and running within 180 days, while the others are expected to come online in quick succession, he said during a conference call with

reporters.

The designations don't come with a financial award from the government.

While selecting the sites, the FAA considered geography, climate, ground infrastructure, research needs, airspace use, aviation experience and risk.

In choosing Alaska, the FAA cited a diverse set of test site locations in seven climatic zones. New York's site at Griffiss International Airport will look into integrating drones into the congested northeast airspace.

Nevada offered proximity to military aircraft from several bases.

Tests will determine whether drones can detect and avoid obstacles—including other aircraft—and whether they can operate safely when they lose contact with their operators.

"These test sites will give us valuable information about how best to ensure the safe introduction of this advanced technology into our nation's skies," Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said in a statement.

An industry-commissioned study has predicted more than 70,000 jobs would develop in the first three years after Congress loosens drone restrictions on U.S. skies. The same study projects an average salary range for a drone pilot between \$85,000 and \$115,000.

North Dakota Sen. John Hoeven said the designation positions his state as a northern hub for unmanned systems and should attract students, researchers and aerospace technology companies.

The growing drone industry has critics among conservatives and liberals.

Giving drones greater access to U.S. skies moves the nation closer to "a surveillance society in which our every move is monitored, tracked, recorded and scrutinized by the authorities," the American Civil Liberties Union declared in a report last December.

Sen. Rand Paul, a Republican from Kentucky, introduced a bill that would prohibit drones from checking for criminal or regulatory violations without a warrant.

"I just don't like the concept of drones flying over barbecues in New York to see whether you have a Big Gulp in your backyard or whether you are separating out your recyclables according to the city mandates," Paul said in an interview, referring to a New York City ban on supersized soft drinks.

Huerta said his agency is sensitive to privacy concerns involving drones. Test sites must have a written plan for data use and retention and will be required to conduct an annual review of privacy practices that involves public comment.

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