

Google parent Alphabet unit to drop burritos by drone

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The Project Wing team at Alphabet is to try out delivering burritos made by Mexican food chain Chipotle by drone on a college campus

A team at Google parent Alphabet working on unmanned aerial systems this month will try out delivering burritos by drone on a college campus in Virginia.

Astro Teller, playfully referred to as the 'Captain of Moonshots' at an X lab created at Google to pursue big-vision projects such as drones and self-driving cars, said in a blog post that Project Wing team was ready to launch the test of a prototype drone delivery system.

US officials announced last week that Alphabet is joining tests for drone deliveries, as the White House unveiled accelerated rulemaking for commercial unmanned aircraft operations.

Teller said that a Wing prototype is ready for testing and that the team will run hundreds of flights in Virginia over the course of several days to deliver lunches prepared in an on-site food truck by Mexican food chain Chipotle.

"We want to learn how people feel when they're receiving a package by air, and taking someone's time and/or money changes things more than a little," Teller said.

"And we want to feel the pressure of unexpected circumstances that show us how we can get better at loading and managing a fleet of planes."

The Project Wing team opted to try out delivering food to create operating challenges including "a lunchtime rush of burrito orders" as well as having to get food to customers hot and in the right shape, according to Teller.

"In future tests, we could add a broader range of items, like drinks, which will push us to handle more weight, keep packages carefully balanced, and manage combinations of items on a single flight," he added.

He believes drones will be available within the next decade for important missions such as delivering medicine and other supplies to areas cut off by disasters and helping emergency responders battle wildfires.

At a "White House Drone Day" event last week, officials announced steps toward expanding rules for drone operations, including for newsgathering and commercial flights over populated areas, after a first set of regulations unveiled in June.

"We hope to propose a rule on unmanned aircraft operations over people by the end of this year," Federal Aviation Administration chief Michael Huerta said.

The government has registered more than 500,000 hobby drones in eight months, but sees a need for more rules for commercial operators, he added.

The first set of rules stop short of allowing some long-sought applications, including delivery of

goods by retailers like Amazon in populated areas.

As the world's largest online retailer, Amazon raised eyebrows in late 2013 with its plan to airlift small parcels to customers by drone in select markets less than 30 minutes after orders are received.

It has gone to other countries to test its evolving technology, and last month announced plans for test deliveries in Britain.

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