

Tiny plane to aid environmental studies

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A Kansas State University research team has built a small, inexpensive remote-controlled plane as a sensing tool to collect environmental data.

The team says it plans to test the prototype over the Konza Prairie Biological Station near Manhattan, Kan., this summer. If the sensing tool performs as expected, it will be made available to climate scientists to obtain high-resolution images and reliable data.

The development of the plane, with its 80-inch wingspan, is part of a three-year research instrumentation project that began last fall with a \$597,000 National Science Foundation grant.

The researchers say the unmanned aerial vehicle should be capable of flying just a few feet above the ground. Onboard digital cameras, spectral radiometers and other instruments will produce high-resolution images and data about small groups of plants and their environmental stress level.

The researchers say the plane will meet a need shared by thousands of environmental scientists worldwide. For just a few thousand dollars, researchers will have a way to collect data for small ecosystem sites at low altitudes and very slow speeds.

Until now, climate research has required costly, piloted airplanes and satellites for earth's images and data, they said.

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