

Burt Witaschek can be found about once a week at a Tulsa park with a remote control in his hand, guiding a small quadcopter buzzing overhead. Witaschek has collected about half a dozen of the flying robots — often called drones — since he took off work in January to treat a cumulative neck injury he developed while working as an aircraft mechanic for 18 years. — I had a lot of time around the house, doing a lot of Internet surfing, and came across a little baby drone for about \$15 and bought that one, started flying it, fell in love with it, bought another one, got a little bigger, a little bigger, and here we are, — he said. Like Witaschek, anyone can go online or to a hobby store, buy an inexpensive unmanned aircraft system and start flying it. With a camera attached at the base, the aircraft can record pictures of crowds at music festivals or scan crops from above farmland. But with increasing reports of unsafe flying and the projection that a record number of the remote-controlled aircraft will be sold this holiday season, federal regulators announced last week that they would begin requiring recreational drone users to register their aircraft. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Aviation Administration announced on Oct. 19 the creation of a task force to devise a registration process and safety recommendations for recreational drone flyers by Nov. 20. The announcement comes after increasing reports of unsafe drone flying, including incidents at major sporting events, flights near manned aircraft and interference with wildfire operations, according to the FAA. Last week, a drone was flying over a wildfire in northern Seminole County as firefighters were responding. The incident prompted the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry to issue a news release alerting the public that flying drones over fires can interfere with firefighting aircraft and can be grounds for criminal charges. On Monday, prison officials seized a drone that had been used to smuggle drugs and other contraband onto the grounds of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. State Sen. Ralph Shortey, R-Oklahoma City, has proposed legislation pertaining to privacy and safety issues with drones, but

he says they haven't passed in part because other legislators are awaiting further regulation by the FAA. Shortey said he supports using drones for productive purposes but he's considered creating his own drone rental company but he thinks they create unique privacy issues that need clearer regulation. I support the technology, but we've got to have rules in place," he said. Vince Howie, aerospace and defense director for the Oklahoma Department of Commerce, said requiring registration would educate recreational fliers on the rules of flying drones and hold them accountable when they break those rules. The FAA currently recommends safety guidelines for flying drones that weigh less than 55 pounds, such as not flying above 400 feet or within 5 miles of an airport without permission. Howie said he applauds the FAA for trying to regulate the hobbyists who are damaging the public's perception of drones because he sees potential for the aircraft to be used for more commercial purposes. "When hobbyists fly and they break the rules, then the public perception is, 'Oh, these things are going to fly all over; they're going to be peeking in my back window; they're going to be over my house,' because they can go outside and see them flying around," Howie said. Commercial drone operators already are required to register with the FAA by applying for a Section 333 exemption, which Howie says is a time-consuming, tedious process. He hopes the task force will simplify it so more companies will use drones for purposes such as agriculture, search and rescue, weather forecasting, and monitoring pipelines and power lines. Brad Gibson, owner of Aerial Concepts OK, recently registered to contract with real estate agents and other companies to take photos and video with drones. "Do I blame the FAA for setting these new rules that everyone must be licensed no matter if they are a hobbyist or professional? No. It was bound to happen, because this is getting out of control," Gibson said. Dale Parrish, owner of a Tulsa company called Hover Visions, also uses drones for real estate photography and other purposes. Parrish said requiring recreational drone operators to register their planes would be a

step in the right direction, and he hopes reports of reckless flying won't prompt legislators to enact laws that will limit his business. If legislators attempt to propose new rules without looking into the issue and contacting operators like myself and others, I believe it can hinder my business and what I'm doing and other good operators like myself," he said. Gabriel Graveline, a Tulsa firefighter, flies drones for Parrish's company when he's off duty. He said he hopes more emergency responders will use the aircraft for search and rescue purposes. "Like most technology in this age, if you put them in the wrong hands it's going to be pushed to its limit or exploited or used for unintended purposes," he said. "But you know if you put them in the right hands, if it's responders that are using them for situations like that, it could really be beneficial." For Witaschek, flying is a soothing activity to pass the time as he waits for his neck injury to heal and go back to work. Plus, it involves two things he loves "flight and electronics. "Without being in it, it's as close to flying as I can get," he said. Witaschek said he hopes to build a community of hobbyists who can educate others about flying the vehicles safely. While he's still relatively new to the hobby, about two months ago he created a Tulsa Drone Club Facebook page for that purpose. While drone enthusiasts are skeptical about how the FAA will regulate recreational drone usage, they are glad steps are being taken to weed out the reckless flyers who are giving the activity a bad name. "It's for the greater good; it really is," Witaschek said. "Something needs to be done. Because there's too many idiots out there picking these up and causing trouble with them." Arianna Pickard 918-581-8413 [arianna.pickard@tulsaworld.com](mailto:arianna.pickard@tulsaworld.com)