Bridging Silicon Valley and the American Heartland:

Drone Regulations As An Unlikely Coalition Builder

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What do farmers, reporters, and tech companies across the United States have in common? They are all fighting with the federal government on current laws and regulations related to an up-and-coming sector of the economy, the commercial use of drone aircraft.

The scope of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) policy on drones today is in a state of transition. As it stands, any aircraft, drone or otherwise, that flies non-commercially in airspace below 400 feet or any model aircraft flown for recreational purposes are not required to have a permit from the FAA.1 There is currently a federal ban on commercial and private drone fliers. This ban, however, is in a state of flux.

Drones are a developing technology with a wide array of applicability. Amazon publicly teased its “Prime Air” program late in 2013. This delivery system would rely on drones to deliver purchases to specific areas in thirty minutes or less.2 Google has also declared its intentions to roll out its own delivery program, titled “Project Wing,” which is currently undergoing testing in Australia.3

But drones are not only applicable to Silicon Valley. Farmers across the world are now turning to drones to help collect data on their crops and help fine-tune their pesticide distribution. Drones are being used in California to prevent widespread insect infestations. They can also be used to inspect wind turbines for cracks and power-lines in an effective and relatively safe manner when compared to human inspections. The Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI) states that drones could be worth as much as $10 billion to the U.S. economy.4

Unfortunately, these economic benefits have yet to be realized. In 2012, Congress passed legislation both reauthorizing the FAA and stipulating the FAA propose a plan for “safe integration” of drones by September of 2015. According to a report from the Washington Post, the FAA will not be ready with this plan until 2017 at the earliest. In a hearing before Congress, FAA safety official Peggy Gilligan acknowledged concerns with the delay and agreed “that the project is taking too long.”5

Meanwhile, the FAA is exempting commercial uses of drones from the federal ban on a case-by-case basis. In early December, exemptions to the drone policy were handed out to help monitor construction sites and oilrigs. Four exemptions were handed out from a total of 167 requests.6 The FAA has opened up six drone test sites to help develop its policies on the matter. In late December, the first test drone was authorized to fly without FAA supervision at the Nevada test location.

The FAA itself estimates that “as many as 7,500 small commercial [unmanned aerial systems] may be in use by 2018.”1 With this figure in mind, the slow march of FAA policy review is coming under fire by members of Congress. Representative Tom Massie (R-KY.) complained about the “geological time scale” of FAA review, according to the Washington Post.5 Multiple media companies, including the New York Times and Associated Press, are arguing that drone policy limits free speech by prohibiting journalists from using footage acquired by drones.8 Amazon has threatened to invest its drone research money abroad if the FAA does not clarify its rules quickly.9

The drone fight has brought together a broad coalition of parties, each interested in a resolution to the antiquated policy. 2015 will be a key year in determining how this fight unfolds and whether the American skyline will be filled with more unmanned aircraft.

1. <http://www.faa.gov/news/updates/?newsId=76240>
2. <http://www.amazon.com/b?node=8037720011>
3. <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-28964260>
4. <http://www.economist.com/news/technology-quarterly/21635326-after-starting-their-career-armed-forces-drones-are-now-entering-civilian>
5. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-switch/wp/2014/12/10/the-faa-wont-make-up-its-mind-on-drone-rules-until-2017-at-the-earliest/>
6. <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2014/12/faa-gives-nod-to-more-commercial-use-of-drones/>
7. <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/faa-authorizing-1st-drone-nevada-test-program-27721656>
8. <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303417104579546181920721424>
9. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/09/us-amazon-com-drones-idUSKBN0JN00N20141209>