Feds Announce Test Sites for Drone Aircraft

MICHELLE RINDELS, Associated Press

Las Vegas (AP) — Six states were named Monday by federal officials to develop test sites for drones — a critical next step for the burgeoning industry that could one day produce thousands of unmanned aircraft for use by businesses, farmers and researchers.

Alaska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia will host the research sites, providing diverse climates, geography and air traffic environments as the Federal Aviation Administration seeks to safely introduce commercial drones into U.S. airspace.

Members of Congress and other politicians lobbied intensely to bring the work to their states. Representatives were jubilant about the likelihood that the testing will draw companies interested in cashing in on the fledgling industry.

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.

"This is wonderful news for Nevada that creates a huge opportunity for our economy," said U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nevada. In New York, Sen. Charles Schumer, a Democrat, called the announcement a boon for his state.

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 curriculum involving drones.

The FAA 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 the skies above America.

"Today was an important step," said attorney Ben Gielow of the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, noting the announcement came after months of delays and data gathering. "I think we're all anxious to get this moving."

The competition for a test site was robust, with 25 entities in 24 states submitting proposals, FAA Administrator Michael Huerta said during a conference call with reporters.

At least one of the six sites chosen by the FAA will be up and running within 180 days, while the others are expected to come online in quick succession, he said. However, the designation as a test site doesn't come with a financial award from the government.

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. And Nevada offered proximity to military aircraft from several bases, Huerta said.

The extent that lobbying influenced the selection of the sites was unclear.

"Politics likely always plays a role in some level in this, but I couldn't tell you specifically what the politics were," said Brendan M. Schulman, part of a New York City-based law group focused on drone issues. "Part of the selection ... is an evaluation of the dedication and seriousness the sites were showing in pursuing this."

The testing will determine whether drones can detect and avoid aircraft and other obstacles, and if they can operate safety when contact is lost with operators.

The growing use of drones has sparked criticism among conservatives and liberals who fear the creation of a surveillance state in which authorities track and scrutinize every move of citizens.

"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," said Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., referring to a New York City ban on supersized soft drinks.

Paul has introduced a bill that would prohibit drones from checking for criminal or regulatory violations without a warrant.

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.

That policy provided little comfort for the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Someday drones will be commonplace in U.S. skies and, before that happens, it's imperative that Congress enact strong, nationwide privacy rules," ACLU attorney Catherine Crump said in a statement.

___

Associated Press writers Dave Kolpack in Fargo, N.D., and Chris Carola in Albany, N.Y., contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/23/2014 - 10:56pm*):
http://www.wirelessdesignmag.com/news/2013/12/feds-announce-test-sites-drone-aircraft