Drone Test Sites Spell Opportunity

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PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — While drones' commercial use is still not legal, the Federal Aviation Administration's announcement of test sites around the country — including ranges in Oregon — is spelling out new opportunities for Northwest entrepreneurs.

Companies once frustrated because they could not get permits to test fly their unmanned aircraft vehicles will now have ranges in Pendleton, Tillamook and on the Warm Springs reservation to aid in developing new technologies.

"There is enormous pent up demand for the opportunity to legally test the systems, because it's been extremely difficult for manufacturers to do so," said Ro Bailey, deputy director of the Alaska Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Drone enthusiasts hope to use the aircraft for everything ranging from crop surveys to law enforcement to fighting fires — and to create hundreds of thousands of jobs — though fears of privacy and government surveillance persist.

The University of Alaska — one of six national test sites for unmanned aircraft chosen by the FAA this week, in addition to Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia — will coordinate drone testing on ranges in Oregon, Hawaii and Alaska.

The new test ranges will most likely be open to almost any unmanned aircraft vehicle, or UAV, business that has the right equipment and meets standards for operator qualifications— from one-man entrepreneurs to larger companies, Bailey said. Requirements and policies, which are yet to be defined, may include having a pilot license or commercial license, a medical certificate, and/or on-the-ground training, depending on the size and type of aircraft.

The beauty of having ranges in three different states, Bailey said, is that it will allow UAV's to be tested in different environments, climates and terrains.

So far, drones have been used mainly by the military. Businesses could either apply for a special, experimental airworthiness certificate for research and development or partner with a public entity such as a university or a sheriff's office — both time-consuming, expensive and uncertain options that experts say barred most entrepreneurs from testing.

The new test ranges will alter that reality.

"It will be a huge help for us; it creates an ecosystem, a place that's local and nearby to test the aircraft, to move the work forward a lot quicker," said Ryan Jenson, CEO of Portland-based HoneyComb LLC. The company, which builds agricultural drones that can help farmers better allocate water, fertilizers and pesticides, has partnered with a local university to test its machines — but the new ranges will make access to testing a lot easier, Jenson said.

For other entrepreneurs, Oregon's ranges will offer the first chance to locally test their technology after years of frustrated progress. Paul Applewhite, founder of Seattle-based Applewhite Aero, has taken his GPS and circuit board-equipped Styrofoam UAV to Canada to test.

Since 2012, the company has been working with the FAA to get an airworthiness certificate, but it's still not been granted — while Canada issued a permit in 14 days, said Applewhite, an aerospace engineer who hopes to use his drones to deliver medicine to remote areas among other uses. Allowing private companies to develop and test UAV's inside the U.S. is key, he said, because manufacturers in Canada, Latvia, Israel and Australia — where the rules are less strict — are already dominating the market.

"The U.S. has a real chance of losing the industry if we don't find a way to test. The six test sites are a step in the right direction," Applewhite, "We need a legal, safe and cost effective manner to develop some great products and create jobs in the U.S."

And the test ranges could help not just companies, but could also help lift entire communities, said Steve Chrisman, the economic development coordinator in Pendleton, where the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport will serve as a test range. The city hosted a conference for drone industry entrepreneurs in October.

"It's a great opportunity for a small rural community and for Oregon as a state," Chrisman said. "We'd love to see any UAV companies locate here, to help create jobs and increase commerce."

For now, it's too early to tell what economic impact if any the test ranges will have on Oregon — or the UAV industry. Granting unmanned aircraft all-out access to U.S. skies is years away. And with drones' commercial use still illegal, experts say, it's

uncertain how much market demand for UAVs there really is and whether the industry will thrive or fail.

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