

Wyden, Merkley worried about looming FAA deadlines

Drone industry could be hurt without clear guidelines from agency

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WASHINGTON — Worried that the Federal Aviation Administration's integration of unmanned drones into American airspace is in danger of falling behind schedule, five senators asked the agency's administrator Tuesday for an update.

The FAA is charged with incorporating unmanned aerial systems, commonly referred to as drones, by the end of 2015.

"Mindful of the great task the FAA has in front of it to regulate the commercial use of UAS within the federal airspace for the first time, we remain concerned about the impacts that continued delays in the process are having on the American UAS industry and the national economy, and the safety risk posed by expanding unlicensed operations," reads the letter, which was signed by Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, Democrats from Oregon.

As part of its efforts, the FAA selected six drone test sites in late 2013, including the Pan-Pacific Unmanned Aerial System Test Range Complex, a three-state entry composed of Oregon, Alaska and Hawaii.

There are three test ranges in Oregon: a roughly 900-square-mile center on tribal land at the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs near Madras, one at Tillamook on the coast and a third in Pendleton, based at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport.

Although the FAA is expected to release its revised rules for flying drones by the end of the year, reports this week in *The Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* indicated the FAA is considering imposing strict limits on commercial flights.

Under the new rules, the FAA would limit commercial flights to daylight hours, impose a 400-foot ceiling on flights (which must stay within view of the operator) and require the person flying the drone to have a license, which could involve a requirement of a significant number of hours spent flying a manned aircraft, according to the media reports.

Critics of the FAA's proposed rules say they are too strict and would choke off the burgeoning drone industry in its infancy.

Examples of commercial uses include aerial photography such as wedding photos and watering hard-to-reach crops.

The FAA did not respond to a request for comment.

Under current rules, recreational drone flights are allowed without permits, but commercial flights require permission from the agency, which has approved a small number of commercial permits.

“It is imperative that the FAA work closely with the industry to ensure it is not creating a burdensome roadblock to innovation and defeating the intent of establishing UAS test sites,” the letter states.

In a prepared statement, Wyden called on the FAA to revisit its rules under consideration.

“In light of recent reports, I am concerned that proposed regulations on small, commercial unmanned aircraft will be costly, needlessly restrictive and hinder research and development for the growing UAS industry,” Wyden said. “The FAA needs to act quickly to alleviate these concerns and issue guidelines for developers and operators of unmanned aircraft that will give certainty to the UAS industry and ensure the safety and privacy of Americans.”

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