

Is it time to tighten drone regulations?

DRONES ARE BECOMING more commonplace and have many practical applications. However, there are more and more instances of drones crashing, taking personal photos or creating other nuisances. Some support tightening drone regulation to prevent these problems, while others argue that ill-conceived rules are unfair and will slow the adoption of drone technology. What do you think?

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- "FAA Small Unmanned Aircraft Registration Begins Dec. 21"
- "No Drone Zone"



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- [They are all] spy drones.
—Boris Piperski
- Hopefully, this will prevent an awful accident on the land, in the air or over the ocean. Progress is wonderful, but regulations would be [the] right way to go to use drones carefully.—Maxine August
- You should not be allowed to fly [drones] around the population. Drones are very cool; however, [a drone can be] very dangerous, [especially] if it gets in the [wrong] hands. Either put regulations [like those for remote-control airplanes in place] or raise the prices so much that not everyone can afford [one]. I think [drones are] too inexpensive now, and without any regulations [we're] just waiting for something really bad to happen.—Augusto Gus Garcia

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- Irresponsible operators can be policed with laws already in place. Endangering public safety is not allowed no matter how it's done. The current movement will stifle innovation and responsible hobbyists.—Alvin Walsh
- More regulations are not needed, but education is. I've advised a number of political jurisdictions that have or are in the process of drafting regulations, and [many] of the proposed or crafted regulations are based on fear and unsubstantial "what ifs" and not hard facts, and that is bad legislation. Unfortunately, most of the populace have a misinformed opinion of [drones] because of what they have seen or read from yellow journalism.—Matt Swinden
- Drones are camera platforms. To control drones is to control free speech; we need to be careful how much restriction we put on them.
—David Thomson

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YES FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



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DRONES ARE ONE of the greatest innovations to enter the skies since the advent of the helicopter. Their use is transforming the field of aviation and making it accessible to all who wish to venture closer to the clouds. Yet, now is the time to step back and evaluate the rapid pace of their integration into the national airspace. Safety, security and privacy are concerns that require careful analysis and must not be overshadowed by the excitement and rapid technological advancement of these innovative aerial machines.

Historically, laws have lagged significantly behind the technologies they are regulating, and in the world of aviation this has been more of the rule than the exception. It was almost 50 years after the Wright brothers' flight that comprehensive safety laws were established as a result of several catastrophic crashes and midair collisions of airliners. The reactive nature of safety laws continued for many decades thereafter, with scores of airliner crashes in the '70s through the mid-'90s becoming the primary motivation for stricter air safety laws. This fly-crash-legislate-fly approach cannot become the model for the drone revolution.

Drones are aircraft that legally are differentiated from manned aircraft by only one factor: They are flown without a human operator in or on the aircraft. The fact that a pilot is not physically on board is significant, especially if the aircraft loses its wireless tether or if the remote operator loses spatial or visual orientation. The drone instantly transforms from an aircraft into an aerial hazard.

A drone flying into the engine of a manned aircraft can be catastrophic. The solid batteries and materials of the drone fuselage can cause engine fans to splinter, sending lethal shrapnel into the wing of the aircraft, which also houses the fuel tanks. In the past year there have been several dozen airliner near misses with drones, and the number of these incidents continues to rise. A drone crashing into a moving vehicle can cause the startled driver to veer into oncoming traffic. A drone can also cause grave bodily injury or even death as it falls onto an innocent person on the ground. [M]

NO FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



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TO BEST STIMULATE innovation, regulators should get out of the way of innovators. Consider a survey in 2003 in which scientists identified now widely accepted medical and technological discoveries that lawmakers initially resisted: airplanes, chlorine, X-rays and more. Unfortunately, with respect to unmanned aerial systems—UASs, or drones—lawmakers are again causing more problems than they are solving at the outset.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) bans commercial drone operations, unless a special exemption is given. Yet recreational users and hobbyists—who may pose a greater danger than commercial operators—fly with far fewer regulatory burdens. While private operators can apply for an exemption for commercial drone use, the distinction between hobby and commercial drones remains arbitrary, creating red tape for responsible businesses without meaningfully addressing risks posed by unscrupulous recreational drone users.

Also, while regulators have raised alarms about drones nearly colliding with passenger jets, the FAA has yet to undertake any methodical effort to assess the actual risks of unmanned aircraft. The agency released a report of 650 "possible encounters with unmanned aircraft," between November 2014 and August 2015, but this data, while great for grabbing headlines, is questionable. Most reported drone encounters occurred above 3,000 feet—well above the 500-foot ceiling established for commercial drones and the 400 feet recommended for model aircraft.

Regulators unquestionably have the power to safeguard the nation's skies. But, as a matter of law, the FAA also has the obligation to promote air commerce. The agency is not satisfying that so far, and in any case it should let the marketplace lead. Manufacturers are self-incentivized to promote safety through customer support and hardware and software solutions that already exist, such as ADS-B, sense-and-avoid and geo-fencing. Insurance and aviation laws also will discipline drone operators and encourage safe flying. [M]

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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