

Droning On

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last spring I wrote about how helpful it would have been to have a drone when my now-wife was sunbathing in her backyard. Drones are everywhere these days, and more will be coming.

I wrote about how the Federal Aviation Administration issued proposed rules for the commercial use of unmanned aircraft systems, as drones are formally known, weighing 55 pounds or less. Drones are used commercially for aerial photography, videotaping sporting events, mapping, inspecting cell towers, bridges and similar structures, and even delivering packages or pizzas.

Under the proposed rules, commercial drones would have to fly below 500 feet in altitude, while privately operated drones have to stay under 400 feet. Commercial and private drones cannot be flown farther away than they can be seen by their operator, and not at all at night. They also must avoid flying within 5 miles of an airport unless they have the permission of the air-traffic control tower.

Aspiring commercial drone operators would have to take an aerospace knowledge test for \$300 that is administered by the FAA to receive a certificate allowing them to operate a drone. In addition, commercial drones are required to be registered with the FAA.

So while federal rules governing the use of drones has been stricter for commercial pilots, that's all about to change.

The U.S. Department of Transportation will seek to require all drones to be registered, including those used by hobbyists. The increased regulation is so that the agency can track down operators who collide their drones with other aircraft or violate aviation safety rules.

The registration requirement is in response to the sky becoming littered with drones. For under \$50, you can purchase online a quadcopter that is equipped with a high-definition camera. As a result, airplane pilots have reported a dramatic increase in the use of drones around airports, which is strictly prohibited.

According to the FAA, so far this year there have been about 100 of these incidents per month, which would more than quadruple the 238 reported incidents in 2014. Two such incidents occurred by the White House, which has practically the most restricted airspace on the planet, and one drone even crashed on the White House lawn.

The pilots soared into action by having their union, the Air Line Pilots Association, which has 52,000 members, ask for a national registry so that if a plane collides with a drone, the authorities can trace the drone debris back to its owner. Violators of the new rules would face fines of \$25,000 and possible criminal penalties.

In addition, the DOT created a task force to refine the registration requirements. Members of the task force come from the Air Line Pilots Association, the Academy of Model Aeronautics, the industry group Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, and the American Association of Airport Executives. One of the task force's jobs is to look into retroactive registration for drones that have already been sold.

The FAA hopes to unveil proposed rules for drone registration by Christmas, with comprehensive rules being completed in June 2016.

I think the Air Force should create drones that are armed and can shoot down other drones entering restricted airspace.

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