

Droning On and On

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When I was in 7th grade, my future wife moved into the house two doors down from us. When we were in high school, she used to lay out on a chaise lounge on the deck behind her house. I put a lot of miles on my bike going by her house trying to get a glimpse of her in her emerald green bikini.

Because of the angle of the house compared to the street, I usually could only see her from her knees down. I really would have benefited from a drone.

Drones are remote-controlled aircraft that operate similar to helicopters. A while back I wrote about several celebrities complaining about drones invading their privacy. Well, under new rules proposed by the Federal Aviation Administration, the skies might be flooded with drones.

While the private use of unmanned aircraft systems, as drones are formally known, has been permitted, the FAA had outlawed their commercial use. The new rules now provide for the commercial use of small drones, or those weighing 55 pounds or less. Drones would be used commercially for aerial photography, videotaping sporting events, mapping, inspecting cell towers, bridges and similar structures, and even delivering packages or pizzas.

Commercial drones would have to fly below 500 feet in altitude. They could not be flown farther away than they can be seen by their operator, and not at all at night.

Safety is a motivating factor for the FAA in expanded the use of drones. According to a study cited by the agency, there were 95 fatalities between 2004 and 2012 involving climbers of cell and other towers. Unmanned drones would eliminate this risk. Likewise, drones would also eliminate the use of expensive hydraulic lifts, cranes and other equipment currently used for such inspections. The study claims the use of drones could save over \$100 million per year.

In addition to the savings, the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, an industry trade association, estimates that in the first three years of their use, commercial drones will create 70,000 new jobs and generate more than \$13.6 billion. Of course, the drones will also displace jobs, such as cell tower climbers and crane operators.

Under the rules, hopeful commercial drone operators could take an aerospace knowledge test for \$300 that is administered by the FAA to receive a certificate allowing them to operate a drone.

If the rules are approved, the FAA is still required to accept public comment, which is expected to come in droves. Accordingly, final regulations may still be several years away. One issue not addressed, however, is airspace: the drones are not prohibited from flying over houses to spy on people working on their tans.

In response, a new company called NoFlyZone.org was created to allow people to let drone operators know they don't want any fly-bys. Similar to 'no-call' lists, the site gives the names of enrollees to the makers and users of drones.

While honoring the list is voluntary, drone operators would be wise to honor it: so far 20,000 people have signed up.

Of course, it would only take me laying out in my leopard print thong once to keep the drones away.

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