FAA's drone test plan leaves privacy to site operators

By Mark Rockwell  
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The Federal Aviation Administration will soon name six locations that will host testing for unmanned aerial systems. The sites themselves will be responsible for maintaining the privacy of any data they collect during their research activities.

On Nov. 7, the FAA released its much-anticipated roadmap that aims to safely integrate unmanned aerial systems into the general national airspace within 10 years. The plan outlines the agency's approach to insuring that more widespread use of unmanned aircraft is safe. The FAA will use the testing to develop requirements and standards for the aircraft.

"We need to make sure we use these sites to obtain the best data that we possibly can," FAA Administrator Michael Huerta said in a statement announcing the roadmap. "The test sites will provide invaluable information that will help us develop policies and procedures to ensure safe, responsible and transparent integration."

Resources

FAA national airspace integration roadmap

FAA comprehensive plan

Information about the test site selection process and privacy policy

The agency plans to select six sites by the end of the year where unmanned aerial vehicle technologies will be developed and tested. States and localities have been lobbying hard to host the sites -- 25 applications from 24 states have been filed with the FAA.

The states believe they have much to gain if the FAA chooses their sites. A study by the state of Utah showed a potential gain of 23,000 jobs and $23 billion in economic impact over 10 years if it were selected.

The FAA is leaving one crucial aspect of the program to whoever wins the drone lottery.

The sites' operators, according to the FAA's plans, will have to develop data storage capabilities that will secure information that might be collected from the surrounding area by unmanned systems. In announcing its data security plans for the sites last February, the FAA said each site selected would have to adhere to federal and state laws, make a privacy policy publicly available and have a written plan for the use and retention of data.

Paul McDuffee, vice president of government relations and strategy at UAV developer Insitu and board member at the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI), told FCW the secure data storage systems developed at the test sites will serve as models for federal operations down the road, as unmanned vehicle use expands nationwide and privacy concerns follow.