

Drone lobby cracks open American Skies: “Enabling unmanned drones to fly freely in civil airspace”

By [Drone Wars UK](#)

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The drone lobby in the US has had a stunning success in pushing its agenda of enabling unmanned drones to fly freely in civil airspace. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Bill has been passed by both Senate and Congress and now simply awaits President Obama’s signature before becoming law. The bill sets a deadline of 30 September 2015 by which the FAA must allow “full integration” of unmanned drones into US civil airspace

This deadline, along with several other provisions were pushed by the US drone lobby group, Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI). In fact AUVSI boast on its website about helping to draft some of bill.

Given that there is as yet no proven technology that would allow drones to ‘sense and avoid’ other aircraft, the deadline of just 3½ years before full integration is either incredibly ambitious – or just plain foolish. Already pilots are expressing their disquiet as Business Week reports:

Commercial airlines and pilots are less than thrilled with the idea of sharing the sky. They point out there’s no system that allows operators of unmanned aircraft to see and steer clear of piloted helicopters and planes. Nor are there training requirements or standards for the ground-based “pilots” who guide them. It’s also not clear how drones should operate in airspace overseen by air-traffic controllers, where split-second manoeuvring is sometimes required. Until unmanned aircraft can show they won’t run into other planes or the ground, they shouldn’t be allowed to fly with other traffic, says Lee Moak, president of the Air Line Pilots Assn.

Privacy issues also seem to have been ignored by the bill (and AUVSI, naturally). Hours before the bill was passed Jay Stanley of the ACLU urged Congress

“to impose some rules (such as those we proposed in our report) to protect Americans’ privacy from the inevitable invasions that this technology will otherwise lead to. We don’t want to wonder, every time we step out our front door, whether some eye in the sky is watching our every move.... The bottom line is: domestic drones are potentially extremely powerful surveillance tools, and that power — like all government power — needs to be subject to checks and balances.”

Despite these safety and civil liberties concerns, thanks to the drone lobbyists thousands of drones will soon be flying in US airspace. The question then is could it happen here? Will unmanned drones be allowed to fly freely in UK civil airspace too? While it may seem like

science fiction at the moment, there are many vested interests working hard behind the scene to make it happen.

At the European level, the EU has been having a series of meetings over the past year to prepare a strategy document for the introduction of drones within European airspace as the Sunday Times recently reported last week (quoting us).

European and UK lobby groups acting on behalf of the drone industry are pushing the advantages of drones and talking up their usefulness in many news publications. New Scientist magazine reports how Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, a lobby group based in the Paris, says that drones will become “vital tools in many fields, from helping police track stolen cars to assisting emergency services in crisis situations such as fires, floods and earthquakes, to more prosaic tasks like advertising or dispensing fertiliser from the air.” (“High time to welcome the friendly drones” said the New Scientist editorial) . The BBC website also last week reported on how drones are cheaper and better at checking on whether farmers are complying with Common Agricultural Policy rules.

In the UK, as regular readers will know, the ‘industry-led consortium’ ASTRAEA, aims “to enable the routine use of UAS (Unmanned Aircraft Systems) in all classes of airspace without the need for restrictive or specialised conditions of operation.”

The programme is funded 50% by the taxpayer and 50% by some of the UK’s biggest military companies. According to the ASTRAEA website, the UK drone lobby group, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems Association (UAVS) and the Ministry of Defence are also ‘stakeholders’ in the programme. As the UAVS website states on their website much of their representation takes place “behind closed doors”.

There are two main hurdles for the drone lobby to overcome before unrestricted drone flying will become the norm in the UK. First is the safety issue. At the moment the UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) which is responsible for UK civil airspace severely restricts the use of drones (but see our article here). Their main objection comes from a safety perspective. At last years ASTRAEA conference, John Clark from the UK CAA told delegates that it is for industry and the UAV community to prove that it will meet standards – “whatever you propose it must be safe” he said. There is a long way to go before the drone industry will satisfy the CAA and the public that drones are at least as safe as ‘manned’ aircraft.

Second is public skepticism. The MoD and the drone industry are well aware that the public do not like the thought of drones flying above their heads in the UK. While there will be a lot of activity over the next year or two by lobbyists focusing on reassuring the public that drones are neither frightening nor dangerous, there also needs to be discussion about what is acceptable to the British public. As Ben Hayes of the campaign group Statewatch says in the BBC piece mentioned above, while there are lots of things that drones can be useful for, “the questions about what is acceptable and how people feel about drones hovering over their farmland or their demonstration – these debates are not taking place.”

Unlike the US, the debate on drones in civil airspace is still wide open. We need to make sure it is not just the industry lobbyists whose voices are heard.

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