

Aerial drone testing proposed for Central Oregon

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BEND (AP) — Aerial drones could begin flying test runs over remote areas of Central Oregon in the near future, if a proposal to open a military operations area to the testing gets federal approval.

The unmanned aircraft are currently prohibited from flying in general airspace, and testing is usually allowed only in restricted military airspace, unless companies obtain special certificates.

That puts testing spots in high demand, and the opening of a new area could boost Central Oregon's economy, according to the nonprofit Economic Development for Central Oregon, which proposed the idea.

Staff of Central Oregon's congressional delegation were briefed on the proposal last week, and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., plans to ask the Federal Aviation Administration if it's feasible.

"We're just beginning the process of going forward with this," said Collins Hemingway, chair of Economic Development for Central Oregon's aviation recruitment committee.

"There is nothing else like that in the country right now."

The military operations area that the economic development group wants to open to drone testing covers a large swath of land in eastern Deschutes County, southern Crook County, western Harney County and northeastern Lake County.

A rancher in the sparsely populated area said Tuesday that drone testing could be a good idea, while a conservation group expressed concern about potential noise and other impacts.

Testing in Central Oregon would include every aspect of the drones' operations, including surveillance technology, said John Lynch, vice president of the unmanned vehicle component producer Outback Manufacturing, in Bend.

Testing would not include munitions, which would have to be tested at a bombing range, he added.

The Bend City Council was scheduled to consider whether to write to Oregon's congressional delegation in support of the testing plan.

Economic Development for Central Oregon has also asked the Deschutes County Commission for support and plans soon to approach officials in the other counties that would be affected.

A committee formed by Economic Development for Central Oregon began searching for strategies to revive the region's aviation industry and help the local economy a year ago, Hemingway said.

The region's aviation industry has struggled since the start of the recession.

Bend kit plane maker Epic Air filed for bankruptcy in 2009, and restarted operations this year under new ownership. Cessna Aircraft Co., which was producing FAA-certified airplanes at a plant at the Bend Municipal Airport, closed its plant in 2009 and moved production to Kansas. Meanwhile, Redmond-based kit plane manufacturer Lancair International has stayed open with help from investments by a new owner.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like general aviation is going to come back anytime soon,” Hemingway said.

Several months ago, the aviation committee started to focus on how it could attract unmanned aerial surveillance companies.

“As we started to talk to (unmanned aerial surveillance) suppliers, they all said the same thing,” Hemingway said. “They needed a place to test their vehicles. That led us to the idea of trying to find a remote area to test these things.”

The wait times for companies to test drones where they are allowed in restricted military airspace is typically at least six months, and spots are “essentially unavailable for the many new designs and technologies being developed,” according to a briefing document written by the committee.

The group proposes to solve the shortage by getting the FAA to approve temporary flight restrictions that would open military operations areas where military aircraft practice maneuvers to drone testing, when the military is not using the airspace.

If the FAA approved drone testing in the military area east of Bend, there would be an immediate economic boost from crews staying at local hotels and eating at local restaurants, according to the briefing document. In the long term, Hemingway hopes aerial surveillance companies might open satellite offices in Central Oregon.

Economic Development for Central Oregon predicts there is at least a two- to five-year window to open testing space to the drones, before the FAA might allow drones to begin flying in the general airspace.

A spokesman for Wyden called the proposal “an intriguing idea” and said the senator’s staff plans to send it to the FAA for feedback.

“We want to send the Central Oregon aviation recruitment proposal to the FAA, with the request that they explore all the implications of this proposal and then do what’s necessary to provide the relevant feedback to the committee on the feasibility of the proposal,” Wyden spokesman Tom Towlsee said Tuesday.

At the office of Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., press secretary Mike Westling said the proposal “merits further exploration.”

Merkley is seeking feedback from local county officials “to make sure there aren’t any unintended consequences,” Westling said Tuesday. “But this seems like a real opportunity for Oregon.”

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, typically wants to know if projects such as this have local support, spokesman Andrew Whelan said.

Eric Folkestad, an engineer who works on business development for the unmanned aerial vehicle manufacturer Arcturus UAV, said Central Oregon would be an attractive area to test the company’s small drones, if a military area opened to testing. Folkestad is based in Washougal, Wash., and the company’s plant is in Rohnert Park, Calif.

Compared with the Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility in Boardman, “Central Oregon would be much nicer for us,” Folkestad said, adding that the company has an eight-person test crew. “We definitely would consider it, and put it on our list of places to go.”

In its briefing paper, Economic Development for Central Oregon says that a dozen companies have said they would use a Central Oregon test area.

However, a spokeswoman for an unmanned aerial vehicle manufacturer in Washington said the company tests its products in Boardman, and currently has plenty of access to testing grounds.

In addition to the Boardman site, Bingen, Wash.-based Insitu Inc., a subsidiary of Boeing, last June began a partnership with the FAA that will allow the federal agency to conduct the research needed to develop recommendations for integrating unmanned aircraft systems into the national airspace, according to a press release on the company’s website.

“I think at the present time, we’re satisfied with what we have,” said Jill Vacek, a media relations specialist with Insitu.

Rancher Stephen Roth and his wife own Bar D R Ranch in Hampton, within the proposed testing area. He said the area is very sparsely

populated and military planes already do frequent flyovers.

The military operations area is “primarily used for training Air National Guard F-15’s from Klamath Falls and for operational practice by the Air National Guard F-15’s out of Portland,” according to the EDCO brief.

“They’ve been flying a lot lately, maybe three or four times a week,” Roth said. He enjoys seeing the aircraft, although his wife does not like it when they break the sound barrier, because they sometimes wake up their young children at night.

“I think it’s a great place for (drones) to fly,” Roth said. “If they kill one of my cows, I want to be reimbursed. Other than that, it’s extremely unlikely they’re going to run into anything.”

Roth hopes to eventually build a wind farm on his property, so he doesn’t want drone testing to interfere with his ability to erect windmills.

And it’s important that the unmanned vehicles not hurt the sage grouse in the area because if they are added to the endangered species list, ranching operations would suffer.

Matt Little, conservation director at the Oregon Natural Desert Association, said he hopes any plan for drone testing would go through a public process and that the vehicles would not fly low to the ground.

The proposed testing area would encompass some existing wilderness study areas, and ones proposed by the association, according to a map provided by Little.

Little said he would be concerned if the drones create noise in “places with wilderness characteristics, where people are trying to get away and recreate.”

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