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FAA delays new rules for operating small drones in U.S. airspace

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New rules for operating small drones in U.S. airspace have been delayed by the Federal Aviation Administration, which has been weighing for years how to regulate these unmanned aircraft over populated areas.

Currently, drones are not allowed to fly in the U.S. except with special permission from the FAA.

But as demand increases for using drones in the commercial world, the agency plans to propose new regulations on small remotely piloted aircraft, a move seen as the first step toward opening the nation's skyways to drone aircraft.

The FAA had said it planned to issue its proposal by this month. Now, the agency says the earliest that the proposed rules would be published was "this spring." The FAA did not say why it was being postponed.

Not everyone has waited for authorization to use drones. Just last week, real estate agents were warned by the Los Angeles Police Department to stop using small drones to create images of properties, saying the unmanned aircraft pose a potential safety hazard and could violate federal aviation policy.

Meanwhile, a number of industries interested in using drones, such as utility companies and law enforcement agencies, are awaiting the FAA proposal.

The FAA doesn't permit drones in national airspace on a wide scale out of concern that the remotely piloted aircraft don't have an adequate "detect, sense and avoid" technology to prevent midair collisions. Under FAA rules, any drone flying above 400 feet needs "certification or authorization" from the administration.

But the FAA has identified only some of the groups and organizations that have the permits. This has drawn fire from the San Francisco digital legal advocacy group Electronic Frontier Foundation.

This month the foundation filed a lawsuit in federal court in San Francisco against the Transportation Department for withholding the names of all organizations interested in flying drones in civil airspace.

The foundation said in the lawsuit that its Freedom of Information Act request for the names has gone unacknowledged since April by the FAA, which is overseen by the Transportation Department.

The foundation said it's concerned that there is no information available to the public about who specifically has obtained these authorizations or for what purposes. The FAA said it wouldn't comment on the suit.

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