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FAA moves toward allowing unmanned drones in U.S. airspace

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Reporting from Washington —

The Federal Aviation Administration has taken the first concrete step toward allowing drones to fly alongside passenger airplanes in the United States.

As required by a law signed by President Obama in February, the FAA is moving forward with a plan to integrate unmanned aircraft into the national airspace by 2015.

In a notice to be published Friday, the FAA is seeking advice on how to select six places across the country that will be used for testing how to safely fly drones in the same area as traditional planes.

Proponents of the plan envision drones being used to help dust crops, fight forest fires, sell houses, shoot movies and assist local police in chasing suspects.

"These test sites will help us ensure that our high safety standards are maintained as the use of these aircraft becomes more widespread," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood in a statement.

Until now, the FAA has banned the widespread use of drones because of concerns that the unmanned planes cannot see other planes and could cause a crash. As a result, the FAA currently requires potential users to pass through a lengthy authorization process.

As of now, the FAA is asking only for input on how to appoint a board that will select the testing sites, and what criteria should be used. The site selection will begin later.

Possible testing sites include airspace along the Canadian border near the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, and airspace near New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, among other areas already used for testing drones for the military, NASA and the Department of Homeland Security.

The University of North Dakota was the first school to offer a four-year degree in piloting unmanned aircraft and is close to Grand Forks Air Force Base, home to the Air Force's Global Hawk and Predator drones as well as two Predators flown by U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

New Mexico State University uses Pentagon research funding to test new types of drones at its flight test center along the Mexican border.

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