APRIL 19, 2012 | BY JENNIFER LYNCH

FAA Releases Lists of Drone Certificates—Many Questions Left Unanswered

View Map of Domestic Drone Authorizations in a larger map

This week the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) finally released its first round of records in response to EFF's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit for information on the agency's drone authorization program. The agency says the two lists it released include the names of all public and private entities that have applied for authorizations to fly drones domestically. These lists—which include the Certificates of Authorizations (COAs), issued to public entities like police departments, and the Special Airworthiness Certificates (SACs), issued to private drone manufacturers—show for the first time who is authorized to fly drones in the United States.

Some of the entities on the COA list are unsurprising. For example, journalists have reported that Customs and Border Protection uses Predator drones to patrol the borders. It is also well known that DARPA and other branches of the military are authorized to fly drones in the US. However, this is the first time we have seen the broad and varied list of other authorized organizations, including universities, police departments, and small towns and counties across the United States. The COA list includes universities and colleges like Cornell, the University of Colorado, Georgia Tech, and Eastern Gateway Community College, as well as police departments in North Little Rock, Arkansas; Arlington, Texas; Seattle, Washington; Gadsden, Alabama; and Ogden, Utah, to name just a few. The COA list also includes small cities and counties like Otter Tail, Minnesota and Herington, Kansas. The Google map linked above plots out the locations we were able to determine from the lists, and is color coded by whether the authorizations are active, expired or disapproved.

The second list we received includes all the manufacturers that have applied for authorizations to test-fly their drones. This list is less surprising and includes manufacturers like Honeywell, the maker of Miami-Dade's T-Hawk drone; the huge defense contractor Raytheon; and General Atomics, the manufacturer of the Predator drone. This list also includes registration or "N" numbers," serial numbers and model names, so it could be useful for determining when and where these drones are flying.

Unfortunately, these lists leave many questions unanswered. For example, the COA list does not include any information on which model of drone or how many drones each entity flies. In a meeting with the FAA today, the agency confirmed that there were about 300 active COAs and that the agency has issued about 700–750 authorizations since the program began in 2006. As there are only about 60 entities on the COA list, this means that many of the entities, if not all of them, have multiple COAs (for example, an FAA representative today said that University of Colorado may have had as many as 100 different COAs over the last six years). The list also does not explain why certain COA applications were "disapproved" and when other authorizations expired.

We raised these questions in our meeting with the FAA today and were assured the agency will release additional records with this important information soon. As we have written before and as Congressmen Markey and Barton (pdf) stated in their letter to the FAA today, drones pose serious implications for privacy, and the public should have all the information necessary to engage in informed debate over the incorporation of these devices into our daily lives. However, while we wait for additional information, these lists help to flesh out the picture of domestic drone use in the United States.

– List of All Certificates of Authorizations (COAs) Issued to Public Entities

– List of All Special Airworthiness Certificates issued to Private Entities

Privacy   Transparency   FOIA

Related Cases

FAA Drone Authorizations

MORE DEEPLINKS POSTS LIKE THIS

APRIL 2012
Miami–Dade PD Releases Information about Its Drone Program; Will the FAA Follow Suit?

JANUARY 2012
Are Drones Watching You?

APRIL 2012
This Week in Transparency: New Documents Posted to EFF's Site, DOJ's Transparency Promises Unfulfilled, and the Secrecy of Dissent

MAY 2012
Local Governments Have the Power to Restrict Drone Surveillance in the US

JANUARY 2012
Texas Cancels Its Drone Program For Maintenance Issues

RECENT DEEPLINKS POSTS

JUN 7, 2012
World's Largest Organization for Computer Professionals Comes Out Against CISPA

JUN 7, 2012
Open Access Victory in Successful Access2Research Petition

JUN 7, 2012
The Cybersecurity Act (S. 2105) Threatens Online Rights – a Handout for Your Senator

JUN 7, 2012
What What!: Appeals Court Affirms South Park Parody Was Obvious Fair Use

JUN 7, 2012
US Government Still Insisting It Can't Be Sued Over Warrantless Wiretapping

DEEPLINKS TOPICS

Analog Hole	EFF Software Projects	Patents
Anonymity	FAQs for Lodsys Targets	PATRIOT Act
Anti–Counterfeiting Trade Agreement	File Sharing	Pen Trap
Biometrics	FOIA	Policy Analysis
Bloggers Under Fire	Free Speech	Printers
Bloggers' Rights	FTAA	Privacy
Broadcast Flag	Health Privacy	Reading Accessibility
Broadcasting Treaty	Hollywood v. DVD	Real ID
CALEA	How Patents Hinder Innovation (Graphic)	RFID
CDA 230	Innovation	Search Engines
Cell Tracking	Intellectual Property	Search Incident to Arrest
		Security

Coders' Rights Project

Content Blocking

Copyright Trolls

Council of Europe

Cyber Security Legislation | CISPA, SECURE IT, Cybersecurity Act

CyberSLAPP

Development Agenda

Digital Books

Digital Radio

Digital Video

DMCA

DMCA Rulemaking

Do Not Track

DRM

E-Voting Rights

EFF Europe

International

International Privacy Standards

Internet Blacklist Legislation

Internet Governance Forum

Locational Privacy

Mandatory Data Retention

Mandatory National IDs and Biometric Databases

Mass Surveillance Technologies

National Security Letters

Net Neutrality

No Downtime for Free Speech

NSA Spying

OECD

Online Behavioral Tracking

Patent Busting Project

Patent Trolls

Social Networks

Terms Of (Ab)Use

Test Your ISP

The Global Network Initiative

Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement

Transparency

Travel Screening

Trusted Computing

Uncategorized

Video Games

Wikileaks

WIPO

Broadcast Flag