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# Drone Use Takes Off on the Home Front

By [ANDY PASZTOR](#) and [JOHN EMSHWILLER](#)

With little public attention, dozens of universities and law-enforcement agencies have been given approval by federal aviation regulators to use unmanned aircraft known as drones, according to documents obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests by an advocacy group.



Dozens of universities and law-enforcement agencies have been given approval by federal aviation regulators to use unmanned aircraft known as drones. Jennifer Valentino-DeVries reports on digits. Photo: AP.

The more than 50 institutions that received approvals to operate remotely piloted aircraft are more varied than many outsiders and privacy experts previously knew. They include not only agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security but also smaller ones such as the police departments in North Little Rock, Ark., and Ogden, Utah, as well the University of North Dakota and Nicholls State University in Louisiana.

The information, released by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, came to light as the Federal Aviation Administration gears up to advance the widespread use of the drones. By the fall of 2015, Congress wants the agency to integrate remotely piloted aircraft throughout U.S. airspace.

The information, released by the Electronic



Associated Press

In February, the Mesa County Sheriff's Department in Colorado tested a drone with an infrared camera. It measures about 36 inch wide.

Although the documents don't indicate how the aircraft will be used, the disclosures likely will fuel privacy concerns involving drones.

On Thursday, Democratic Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Republican Rep. Joe Barton of Texas asked the acting administrator of the FAA to answer questions about the privacy implications of increased drone use.

## Organizations That Have Sought to Use Drones

See a list of what groups have requested licenses from the FAA to use drones, and the status of that request.

**More photos and interactive graphics**

The FAA previously said it has approved dozens of nonmilitary uses of unmanned aircraft, ranging from law enforcement to firefighting to wildlife monitoring. Drones also have been used for news coverage, mapping and agricultural applications.

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**Electronic Frontier Foundation website**

The University of North Dakota uses drones in connection with an undergraduate degree program in unmanned aircraft systems it started in 2009. Al Palmer, a university official involved

in the program, said about 78 students have declared majors in the field and that graduates have found jobs with drone manufacturers or operators.

The North Little Rock police department has been working with a small pilotless helicopter since 2008, said Sgt. Pat Thessing. It is currently training with the aircraft over unpopulated areas only, while it awaits FAA rules for use of such aircraft elsewhere. It hopes to use them for surveillance of high-crime neighborhoods, during drug investigations and other work.

The list obtained by the EFF represents all entities that have applied for drone permits, but doesn't show how many drones each entity has, said Jennifer Lynch, a staff attorney with the group. FAA officials have talked about the existence of about 300 active permits.

Recipients of these special permits must fly in a certain geographic area outlined on their application. Currently, the FAA typically doesn't allow drones to fly through airspace where commercial, business and private planes travel.

Ryan Calo, who conducts research into privacy and robotics at Stanford Law School, said the domestic use of drones will likely grow as more machines are brought back from war and as prices fall.

"The very same drone that was staking out a nest of insurgents and possibly shooting them could be deployed in New York for surveillance" after removal of weaponry, Mr. Calo said. He said the use of drones could spark a wider debate about privacy because people aren't accustomed to such technology. "If you bring back a tank from Afghanistan, you don't expect it to show up in a park," he said.

—Jennifer Valentino-DeVries and Andrew Morse  
contributed to this article.

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