

Departures Opinions On Current Issues In Aviation

By Capt. Joe DePete,
president, Air Line Pilots
Association, International

Package-Delivery Drones Drop New Safety Risks At Airline Passengers' Front Doors

Airline passengers may not realize that U.S. government regulatory waivers allowing package-delivery companies to fly drones in airspace shared with airplanes could deliver significant safety risks on their next flight.

The FAA is being pressured to circumvent the normal regulatory process and approve private companies' one-off requests to operate drones exempt from federal safety rules.

As the world's largest nongovernmental aviation safety organization, the Air Line Pilots Association, International has fully engaged in efforts to safely use drones or unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) for select purposes. But airline pilots are also keenly aware of the potential risk to our passengers if we don't maintain our established high level of safety in air transportation.

The reason that U.S. air transportation is extremely safe is largely due to a robust regulatory structure designed and implemented by the FAA that makes certain all users of the national airspace operate to equivalent levels of safety. We've developed these aviation safety regulations through accident investigation and data-driven risk analysis.

Through its history, the airline industry has reacted to recommendations that result from accident investigation to improve safety—and with remarkable success. For example, when Congress directed the FAA to review the 2009 Colgan Flight 3407 accident and 30 others and it found that shortcomings in airline pilot qualification and training had played a role in all of them. In response, we improved pilot qualification and training regulations. As a result, the United States hasn't had a single fatality in Part 121 passenger flight operations due to pilot training in the past decade.

Despite the positive results of this approach, package-delivery companies are seeking permission to conduct their own accident and incident investigations. Would such "internal" investigations mean that the results won't be shared with regulators or investigatory bodies such as the NTSB?

In addition to the reactive approach to improving safety through accident investigations, the FAA and industry have introduced a proactive data-driven approach to safety that identifies risks and addresses them before accidents ever occur. One of our industry's most effective safety tools in gathering data is voluntary, non-punitive safety reporting programs that allow pilots, controllers, mechanics, and other aviation professionals to report safety hazards they observe without fear of disciplinary action.

Despite their value to safety, commercial drone package-delivery operators aren't sharing details about how they plan to operate, such as whether their employees have access to these types of voluntary safety reporting programs or whether the companies will report safety issues to the FAA at all. The businesses claim that

their operating plan is proprietary and can't be shared.

In addition, when considered more broadly, the safety-rule waivers granted to these drone delivery companies may create sweeping changes in the way our national airspace system has safely operated for decades. For example, these companies say they plan to operate UAS beyond visual line of sight, meaning that the drone pilots won't be able to directly observe the UAS while it's flying. But there

“Commercial drone package-delivery operators aren't sharing details about how they plan to operate ... or whether the companies will report safety issues to the FAA at all.”

—Capt. Joe DePete, president, ALPA

aren't any FAA standards that prescribe how operators will accomplish the requirement to “see and avoid” hazards beyond

visual line of sight. As a result, each UAS operator is developing its own proprietary solution in secret, leaving airline pilots concerned because it's unclear whether the procedures will be adequate to ensure safety.

This is only one example of how the FAA's lack of a comprehensive regulatory package for commercial drone delivery companies is prompting requests for piecemeal exemptions that threaten to erode the safety of the national airspace system. Of equal concern is that, while these current approvals for exemption from safety rules are part of a test program and limited in scope, nothing prevents these companies from asking the FAA to authorize more UAS flights through similar piecemeal extra-regulatory action that doesn't allow for public input.

Airline pilots urge the FAA to continue its long history of putting safety first in the national airspace and to work collaboratively with these package-delivery companies through the traditional rulemaking process that includes full public comment from other airspace users. It's up to the FAA to deliver a package of UAS safety regulations that makes certain a public resource is used safely by all.

Capt. Joe DePete serves as the eleventh president of the Air Line Pilots Association, International, which represents more than 63,000 professional airline pilots in the United States and Canada and is the largest nongovernmental aviation safety organization in the world.

Aviation Daily welcomes Op-Eds. By-lined submissions should be sent to mark.nensel@informa.com. They should be exclusive to Aviation Daily and no longer than 700 words. The author's title, affiliation and contacts must be supplied. Aviation Daily reserves the right to edit for space and house style.