



AIRLINE PILOTS UNION: DRONES COULD BE LINK IN ACCIDENT CHAIN

News / Airlines



Aviation accidents often result from a chain of missteps, and the presence of unauthorized small drones in controlled airspace is one potential link that cannot be discounted, said the president of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). With incidents of rogue drone encounters on the rise, the pilots' union is backing legislation that would give the Federal Aviation Administration more power to regulate the recreational use of unmanned aircraft.

“No accident is the result of a single event,” said Tim Canoll, a Delta Air Lines MD-88 captain and former U.S. Navy pilot who took over as ALPA president in January. “We think of it as a chain of events—each link of the chain being an element that, if removed, would have prevented the accident. We always look at each element—whether it be weather, air traffic control, fatigue, aircraft design, unmanned aerial systems—as potentially adding to an accident. We’re constantly looking for ways to mitigate the threat posed by that link in the chain, and that’s the way we’re looking at unmanned aerial systems. They are a link in a chain that could lead to an accident.”

Canoll offered his thoughts on recent records releases by the FAA that brought to light hundreds of reported drone sightings by airline and general aviation pilots over the past two years. Last

November, in response to media requests, the FAA released a summary of incident reports that for the first time indicated a surge in drone sightings, including fly-bys at major airports. The agency provided **AIN** with a spreadsheet listing 194 “non-COAUAS” events, or flights involving unmanned aircraft systems that did not have certificates of authorization from the FAA, between February and November 2014.

The FAA released further records on two occasions in August, both times apparently prompted by front-page articles in *The Washington Post* warning of a growing threat to aviation from rogue drones. On August 12, the agency announced that pilot reports of seeing unmanned aircraft had nearly tripled, from 238 in all of 2014, to 650 in the first seven months of the year. On August 21, it released summaries of 765 sightings between Nov. 13, 2014, and August 20. Among the more recent incidents, the pilots of a Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 on final approach to Orlando International Airport spotted a drone at between 1,000 and 1,500 feet above the ground; the pilots of a JetBlue Embraer E190 on approach to New York's John F. Kennedy International at 700 feet; and the pilots of an American Airlines MD80 on approach to Dallas-Fort Worth International at 500 feet.

The recreational use of model aircraft-and now drones-has been subject to voluntary guidance since 1981. A provision of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 states that the FAA “may not promulgate any rule or regulation regarding a model aircraft” that is flown “strictly for hobby or recreational use.” But the provision requires that such aircraft be “operated in a manner that does not interfere with and gives way to any manned aircraft.” Operators must first inform airport or ATC authorities when planning to fly within five miles of an airport.

ALPA supports legislation U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) introduced on June 18, called the Consumer Drone Safety Act, that would provide more front-end regulation of small drones. The proposed law would set a maximum altitude that consumer drones could fly to, and establish areas where flights are restricted because of the possibility of “unsafe interactions with manned aircraft,” or the risk of damage to persons or property on the ground. It would require the manufacturers of consumer drones, “whether through software or other technological means,” to cap their altitude and prevent them from flying near airports or within protected airspace. Through “sensors and software or other similar means,” drones would come equipped with a collision-avoidance capability and the means to safely and autonomously land in the event of a lost communications link with the operator. They would have registration numbers that pilots and controllers could identify, and transponders to signal their position in space.

“We’re pleased that that bill takes steps toward regulating that element [of recreational drones],” Canoll said. “We’re not about restraining people from doing things, but we are about maintaining the safest air transportation system in the world.”

Under another provision of the 2012 legislation known as Section 333, the FAA has granted more than 1,200 exemptions to operators to fly small unmanned aircraft for commercial purposes. Whereas early Section 333 operators needed at least a private pilot’s license to fly their machines, the FAA now allows operations by people holding a recreational or a sport pilot certificate. In comments early in the permit-granting process, ALPA had called for operators to have commercial pilot’s licenses.

“We’re not directly opposed to the exemptions the FAA has been putting in place,” Canoll said. “But we do believe that if the vehicle is intended to, or has the capability to operate in our national airspace—airspace shared with the aircraft that my members fly with passengers on their airplane, they must be operated by pilots who are familiar [with airspace rules]. These are very capable machines, and while the intent might not be specifically to operate it in the national airspace, they

do have the ability to blunder into the airspace or lose link and end up in our airspace. I need an operator that is aware of the hazards related to that possibility.”

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