

# Up in the air: Valley real estate firms using drones in marketing of properties

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By Helen Tracey-Noren

Aaron Lipinski, owner of Precision Aerial, right, pilots his drone, as Realtor Rod Aluisi remotely controls the onboard camera, to get video of property he's selling to show clients.

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Previously used by hobbyists, drones are becoming more popular with Valley real estate groups and photographers.

But before this marketing tool can take off, the Federal Aviation Administration needs to consider rules for commercial users.

The National Association of Realtors has advised against using unmanned aircraft until the FAA has come out with official rules, but some Fresno-area companies are flying them anyway.

Mark Chu, a broker at Big Realty REO Group in Fresno, said he has been using drones for two months. They help showcase larger properties and farmland, he said. But more importantly, drones draw attention.

"It definitely creates more excitement in the business," Chu said. "It's innovative. People are always looking for something new online."

The training Chu's drone operators have taken is an online course in safety precautions and use of their new eye in the sky.

Users can see a combination of video and still images from drones on real estate agencies' and other



businesses' websites.

Rod Aluisi, owner of Rod Aluisi Real Estate based in Fresno, said drones have been a valuable marketing tool in the nine months he has had one.

"It's strictly for business. It's not a toy for me," Aluisi said. "It's strictly so we can get quality marketing."

Aluisi owns two drones — one cost \$1,200 and the other cost \$6,000, he said. His pilot's training consisted of 100 hours of flying time in a vacant field.

Drones aren't worth using on smaller properties, Aluisi said. Instead, he wants to give high-end property owners a new selling method.

"It's about staying on the cutting edge and giving 100% to the sellers," Aluisi said. "Buying an ad in a magazine costs \$800 — if you're going to buy that kind of marketing, the photos better be good quality. And they are with the drones."

The FAA states that commercial purposes are not covered under the Model Aircraft guidelines — below 400 feet, three miles from an airport and away from populated areas.

A Virginia judge ruled against the FAA's ban on commercial drone flights earlier this year. But commercial drone users still face a possible \$10,000 fine from the FAA.

"The rules for commercial unmanned aircraft systems operation are clear," Ian Gregor, a spokesman for the FAA, said in a written statement. "Anyone who wants to fly an aircraft — manned or unmanned — in U.S. airspace needs some level of authorization from the FAA."

The FAA plans to publish a broad proposed rule for operating small drones later this year, but Gregor gave no specific date.

Fresno photographer Chris Geiger uses his aerial vehicle to supplement his wedding photography. His remote-controlled HeliCam usually stays between 85 and 100 feet in the air, but is programmed to stay under 400 feet, he said, the same as FAA model aircraft guidelines.

"The angle of view is better with (the HeliCam), you can get lower," Geiger said. "With a full-sized aircraft, you can't get that low."

Geiger said the average HeliCam flight lasts 15 to 20 minutes depending on battery strength and camera weight. He uses a single-lens reflex, or SLR-type camera, shooting at 1/1,000 of a second.

Safety is a high priority to Geiger, who has been using his HeliCam for two years.

"One has to be extremely careful with the crowds below," Geiger said. "I enjoy using it for pictures, but there's been a lot of rules from the FAA. Most importantly: Fly safely, not over crowds, and respect the privacy of people."

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6279, [htraceynoren@fresnobee.com](mailto:htraceynoren@fresnobee.com) or @HtraceyNoren on Twitter.