

## Federal regulators to require registration of recreational drones

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Among the small drones that are catching on with hobbyists is this DJI Inspire 1, manufactured by SZ DJI Technology Co. DAVID PAUL MORRIS / Bloomberg

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WASHINGTON - Federal regulators said Monday that they plan to require recreational drone users to register their aircraft with the government for the first time in an attempt to restore order to U.S. skies, which have been invaded by rogue flying robots.

U.S. officials said they still need to sort out the basic details of the registration system but concluded that they had to take swift action to cope with a surge in sales of inexpensive, simple-to-fly drones that are increasingly interfering with regular air traffic.

"The signal we're sending today is that when you're in the national airspace, it's a very serious matter," Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx told reporters.

Pilots of passenger planes and other aircraft are reporting more than 100 sightings or close calls with rogue drones a month - a significant increase just in the last year, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Under FAA guidelines, drone owners are not supposed fly their aircraft above 400 feet or within five miles of an airport without permission. But the rules are widely flouted, and officials have been largely powerless to hunt down rogue drone operators.

Requiring drones to be registered will be of limited use for investigators unless the remote-controlled aircraft crash and a registration number can be found. Most drones are too small to appear on radar and do not carry transponders to broadcast their locations.

But regulators hope that forcing owners - many of whom are aviation novices - to register their drones with the government will at least make them think twice about their responsibility to fly safely and the possibility that they could be held accountable for an accident.

The FAA and the Transportation Department are setting up a task force composed of government officials and industry representatives to devise the new registration system. Foxx said the group has until Nov. 20 to finalize its recommendations so the government can set up the registry before Christmas - the peak season for drone sales.

"We do intend to move very quickly," he said.

The task force will have to wrestle with the basic question of size limits and what kinds of drones will have to be registered. Most consumer models weigh only a few pounds and resemble toys, but many can easily reach altitudes above 1,000 feet.

Foxx said the registration rules will apply to people who have already bought drones in recent years, not just new owners. He said the FAA would impose penalties - which he did not spell out - on anyone who does not comply.

Nobody knows exactly how many of the robotic aircraft are flying around, but most estimates top one million.

The Consumer Electronics Association, an industry group, estimates that hobbyists will buy 700,000 drones in the United States this year, a 63 percent increase from 2014.

In addition to snarling air traffic, nuisance drones across the country have interfered with firefighters, flown into tall buildings, and crashed into bystanders on the ground. Criminals have used them to smuggle contraband into prisons. Some property owners have become so irritated by drones buzzing overhead that they have gotten out their shotguns and opened fire.

In general, the drone misadventures have been taking place in a regulatory vacuum. The FAA has banned most businesses from flying drones until it can finalize new safety rules - a step that will take at least another year.

But hobbyists who fly drones for fun are largely unregulated. Under a law passed by Congress in 2012 to protect model-airplane enthusiasts, the FAA is prohibited from imposing new restrictions on recreational drone owners. As a result, they have not been required to obtain pilot licenses or undergo training.

Although the FAA lacks the authority to license recreational drones, it does have the power to impose civil fines on anyone who recklessly interferes with air traffic or endangers people on the ground. Foxx also said the FAA has the authority to require the registration of any aircraft that fly in the national airspace - manned or unmanned.