

ADVERTISEMENT

Police, rescuers study use of small-scale drone aircraft

Eyes in the sky can track criminals, find lost kids - and rattle civil libertarians.

11:57 PM, Sep 16, 2012 | Comments

Recommend

You and 16 others recommend this. 16 people recommend this.

Recommend

✉ 🖨 ↶ A A+



OPEN

Environment's Qube, designed for first responders, can hold position and altitude as it scans an area for lost or injured persons. / Special to the Register

Written by Daniel P. Finney

The word "drone" conjures up the image of massive, missile-firing, highly lethal Predator unmanned aircraft that revolutionized combat during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

FILED UNDER

News
Iowa State Patrol

But much smaller eyes soon could be patrolling domestic skies, launched by police, first responders and other agencies. These unmanned flight vehicles are intended to help provide information and mitigate danger in natural disasters and other emergencies. They could provide air surveillance in a hostage crisis or SWAT team deployment, help search for missing children or map the scene of a traffic pileup from the air.

ADVERTISEMENT

Most Popular

Most Commented

More Headlines

- 1 Food stars: TV crew films 3 central Iowa eateries
- 2 Crash near Altoona shuts down I-80 for hours
- 3 GOP's Ryan equates Obama's re-election with economic disaster
- 4 Iowa State and Northern Iowa reach football scheduling agreement
- 5 Police ID man wanted in Living History Farms burglary

Most Viewed



However, civil liberties proponents want strict regulations in place before the birds take flight.

Military vs. domestic drones

The type of unmanned craft available to domestic law enforcement is much smaller in size than the famous Predator drone manufactured by General Atomics. A thumbnail look at both:

PREDATOR

WEIGHT: More than 2.2 tons fully loaded and armed, carrying up to 12 missiles

FLIGHT DURATION:

24 hours, at a maximum speed of 135 mph

COST: \$4.1 million each

DOMESTIC UNMANNED AIRCRAFT

WEIGHT: From 3 pounds to 50 pounds; most weight goes into the cameras aboard — high-definition still, video and infrared

FLIGHT DURATION:

About 45 minutes to 2 hours

COST: \$19,000 to

\$300,000 each

“These things are coming,” said Ben Stone, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa. “It seems pretty inevitable that at some point Iowa law enforcement is going to start getting this. We need to get in front of this technology and provide guidance through our domestic institutions as to how these technology advances are going to be used.”

Americans support limited use of drone technology in special circumstances but are leery of more routine uses, according to a June national poll by Monmouth University in West Long Branch, N.J.

Eighty percent of respondents said the unmanned aircraft should be used for search-and-rescue operations. Two-thirds supported using drones to track criminals, and 64 percent approved of using drones to control illegal immigration along borders.

However, for more routine tasks — such as issuing speeding tickets — 67 percent opposed use of drones.

Police are intrigued, but cost is an issue

Iowa’s three largest police agencies — the Iowa State Patrol and police in Des Moines and Cedar Rapids — have no plans to buy unmanned flight vehicles soon. But there’s at least some interest in doing so.

“Like all equipment, it’s a question of budget and cost-effectiveness,” said Sgt. Chris Scott, Des Moines police spokesman. “They sound like useful tools, but they’re not in the plans at the moment.”

Nationally, only a few law enforcement agencies have purchased or tested this emerging technology. They include sheriff’s offices in Mesa County, Colo., Montgomery County, Texas, and Los Angeles County, Calif.

However, top manufacturers of flight vehicles say they’ve been demonstrating the technology nationwide for several years.



Mother, girlfriend talk about ISU's Jake Knott

Sep. 08, 2012

PHOTO GALLERIES



I-80 accident near Altoona



ISU tailgating vs. W. Illinois

ADVERTISEMENT

Some reports circulating on the Internet via blogs and social media have claimed that as many as 30,000 drones could be in U.S. skies by 2020. However, Federal Aviation Administration officials say that number is bogus. An aerospace industry forecast has projected a possible 30,000 drones worldwide by 2018, with half of them in the U.S.

The FAA regulates the domestic use of unmanned flight vehicles. Law enforcement agencies and some educational institutions who use the devices must apply for a certificate of authorization that details the type of device used, the way the vehicle will be used, how long it will be airborne and the specific information that will be gathered.

“Most people are not familiar with this class of technology,” said Steve Gitlin, a vice president of AeroVironment, a Monrovia, Calif., drone manufacturer. “The systems we make can be carried in a backpack or, in the case of our largest aircraft, carried in something that looks like a guitar case. They are assembled in minutes by hand, and they’re operated by the individual who is carrying them.”

The Qube, a product of AeroVironment, looks like a track baton with four propellers.

Drones used to aid education, business

The drones also have educational and commercial uses. Vanderbilt University used an unmanned flight vehicle from Aurora Flight Sciences of Manassas, Va., to survey an archaeological dig in the mountains of Peru. Other institutions have used the vehicles to survey wildlife migration patterns and patrol oil pipelines.

Few customers are looking for an airborne weapon, manufacturers said. Most domestic unmanned aircraft are not heavy enough to carry them.

AeroVironment said it provides 85 percent of the U.S. military’s unmanned flight vehicles, and it’s producing only one with lethal capabilities. The company has no products in the works for domestic use. Aurora officials said potential customers have little use for flying guns.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police this month issued its first national advisory on the use of unmanned aircraft in local law enforcement, and urged that the aircraft not be armed.

“Everybody in the law enforcement community that we’ve spoken to is not interested in arming them,” said Carl Schaefer, Aurora director of small unmanned air vehicles. “They just don’t want to get involved in all that entails.”

One thing all the vehicles entail, however, is surveillance. Stone,

the Iowa ACLU director, acknowledges legitimate uses for the unmanned air vehicles but sees potential threats to privacy, too.

Unlike manned helicopters or airplanes, which are expensive to buy, maintain and insure, unmanned air vehicles are much less cost-prohibitive, Stone noted. So when the technology takes off in the Hawkeye State, there will most likely be a lot of them, he said.

ACLU leaders are particularly concerned with how the information collected by drones would be used, who would have access to it and how it would be stored.

“Civil libertarians don’t like the government keeping lots of information about innocent people engaged in innocent activity indefinitely in its databases,” Stone said. “It’s not just about when and how to use the aircraft. One thing the ACLU wants to see happen is tight restriction on how data can be accumulated across databases. Some of this stuff could be very lucrative to sell to corporations. It could be dangerous to individuals.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Should Iowa law enforcement agencies purchase and use unmanned drone aircraft to aid their work?

Yes.

No.

I don't know.

I won't care either way.

Vote

[View Results](#)

[View Comments](#) | [Share your thoughts »](#)

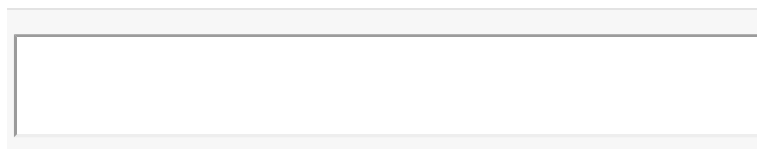
TOP VIDEO PICKS

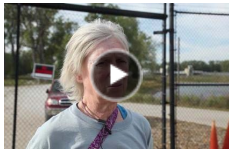
selected by Taboola



Mother, girlfriend talk about ISU's Jake Knott

Sep 8, 2012





Dr. Sue Savage
Rumbaugh put on leave...
Sep 11, 2012



Reaction to Obama's
speech at University of ...
Sep 7, 2012

ARCHIVES

View the last 30 days

Yesterday, Sep. 17

Sunday, Sep. 16

Saturday, Sep. 15

Friday, Sep. 14

Thursday, Sep. 13

Wednesday, Sep. 12

Tuesday, Sep. 11

See our [paid archives](#) for news older than a week.

PROMOTIONS



CUSTOMER SERVICE

ADVERTISEMENT

DesMoinesRegister.com

[Site Map](#) | [Back to Top](#) ^

NEWS

- Politics
- Crime & Courts
- Education
- Kyle Munson
- Nation & World
- Weather
- Archive
- Investigations & Watchdog Reports
- Reader's Watchdog
- Famous Iowans

LIFE

- Mike Kilen
- Juice
- Health
- Dating
- Milestones

SPORTS

- HawkCentral
- Cyclone Insider
- High School Insider
- Bryce Miller
- UNI Panthers
- Drake Bulldogs
- National Sports
- History & Databases
- Photos

OPINION

- Editorials
- Rekha Basu
- Kathie Obradovich
- Guest Essays
- Letters to the Editor
- Your 2 Cents' Worth
- Blogs
- A Better Iowa

BUSINESS

- Agriculture
- Central Iowa Networking
- Green Fields
- Biz Buzz
- Finance & Insurance
- New in the Neighborhood
- Iowa's Top Workplaces
- Iowa Innovation

COMMUNITIES

- Altoona
- Ankeny
- Clive
- Des Moines
- Indianola
- Johnston
- Urbandale
- Waukee
- West Des Moines

ENTERTAINMENT

- Metromix
- Restaurant Guide
- Datebook
- Events
- Dining
- Music
- Theater
- Movies
- TV Listings
- Comics

OBITUARIES

- Submit an obituary
- Submit a memorial

HELP

- Subscriber Solutions
- Advertising Solutions
- Reader Solutions
- About Des Moines Register Media
- Contact us
- Media Kit

FOLLOW US

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Mobile
- RSS
- E-mail Alerts
- Text Alerts



GANNETT

Copyright © 2012 www.desmoinesregister.com. All rights reserved.

Users of this site agree to the [Terms of Service](#), [Privacy Notice/Your California Privacy Rights](#), and [Ad Choices](#)