

UAV Testing in Alaska Could Pave Way for Industry

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

When Alaska Lieutenant Governor Mead Treadwell swung through Kodiak last week on a campaign swing, he took time for an interview with KMXT about a number of topics. One was about the announcement that Alaska, and specifically Kodiak, has been selected by the FAA to conduct unmanned aerial vehicle flight tests.

He said he believes Kodiak is ideally suited for such activity.

“As the FAA had this competition nationally, for sites, in Alaska 58 different companies and agencies came together. And we also had ranges in Oregon and Hawaii join us. And there are six ranges in Alaska that are likely to do UAV research, so companies from all over the world, actually, may be coming here to do that work. But ultimately, being able to fly out of Kodiak and be able to use the airspace south of here is very exciting for that.”

Treadwell, who has been active in aerospace issues since running the Institute of the North at Alaska Pacific University, believes there will be plenty of business opportunity for private and government-contracted UAV use in Alaska.

“We’ve got plenty of dull, dirty and dangerous jobs, where having UAVs are going to be very important. When you have volcanoes go off that interrupt international air traffic, you need to be able to get in there and you don’t want to fly people into volcanic ash, but you want to be able to get in there for better predictably. Forest fires — you can again get much closer to a fire to figure out where to direct your resources. Surveying earthquake damage and search and rescue. I think this is going to help save lives.”

UAV development has been led by military and intelligence needs, and many vehicles are used to spy on enemy soil and to launch missile attacks. Given that, Treadwell says he’s concerned about privacy and safety when UAVs operate in American skies.

“Number one is we have to protect the safety of people in civil aircraft. And having testing areas where we can make sure you can integrate unmanned aircraft with manned aircraft so you don’t have collisions is incredibly important. The second thing to me is protecting people’s privacy. People are very concerned that some of these devices are very small, very quiet, virtually invisible. Either fly low and can follow you around, or fly high and you have no idea that you are under surveillance. So to make sure that as these things happen you’re not doing searches without a warrant, that people’s privacy, that our Fifth Amendment rights are taken care of.”

In fact, one piece of legislation prefiled for this year’s legislative session would bar evidence obtained by UAV or drone in criminal court cases unless it was collected after a warrant was obtained.

KMXT had planned to bring you a prerecorded Talk of the Rock with Lieutenant Governor Treadwell today but that has been rescheduled for next week.

