Congress Opens Market for Commercial Unmanned Aircraft Systems

Paul Dempsey, Senior Correspondent, Footwasher Media

Buried deep in this month's controversial Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) funding bill, passed by the Senate in an unusually bipartisan 75-20 vote were provisions to boost commercial potential for unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Assuming President Obama's signature, the four-year $63B budget bill mandates the FAA to establish necessary technological and regulatory means for private UAS companies to begin full operation within four years.

Research by the Teal Group suggests the UAS sector "will more than double over the next decade from current worldwide expenditures of $4.9B annually to $11.5B, totaling just over $80B in the next 10 years."

At the hobbyist level, UAS are legal. As a kid, you may well have flown one in local parks at weekends. But commercial use of even these kits is currently banned, as a real estate agent recently found out when he attempted to add aerial views of prime properties to interior ones. The FAA grounded him.

The use of Predator drones in Iraq is the most popular view of "professional [1]" UAS, but the aviation industry has already identified many potential private applications.

"Once people can fly UAS in the national airspace for civil and commercial purposes, whole new industries will emerge, inventing products and accomplishing tasks we haven't even thought of yet," said Michael Toscano, president and CEO of the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, based in Arlington Virginia. Toscano identified natural applications include oil and pipeline monitoring, crop dusting, and search and rescue, with additional unthought of opportunities [2] in the sensing and monitoring payloads commercial UAS will carry.

Nor are the opportunities confined to the US. The European Union acknowledges that its members are playing catch-up. As the Senate voted through the FAA bill, the EU UAS research team met in Brussels with an urgent remit to deliver a similar framework for opening up skies on the other side of the Atlantic. The target is to do so before the end of 2012 [3].

One warning though. The FAA bill contains no mention of the civil liberties issues that are already being voiced over a potential proliferation of “spies in the skies”

“This bill would push the nation willy-nilly toward an era of aerial surveillance [4] without any steps to protect the traditional privacy that Americans have always enjoyed and expected,” said Jay Stanley of the American Civil Liberties Union.

There may still be a dogfight ahead. Many, in our industry too, would even say a necessary one.

Key commercial UAS deadlines in FAA Authorization Bill

• Full integration of UAS into US national airspace by 30th September, 2015
• FAA to present a comprehensive UAS integration plan within nine months
• FAA to maintain a rolling five-year UAS roadmap
• UAS under 55 lbs to be allowed to fly within 27 months
• Six UAS test sites to be opened within six months
• FAA to study UAS human factors and causes of accidents

Source URL (retrieved on *03/11/2014 - 8:02pm*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/articles/2012/02/congress-opens-market-commercial-unmanned-aircraft-systems?qt-video_of_the_day=0

Links:
[1] http://http://www.ecnmag.com/Articles/2011/06/App-Solutions/Its-all-about-system-integration-for-military-systems/
[2] http://http://www2.electronicproducts.com/Power_management_trends_challenges_in_UAV_apps-article-fapo_TI_UAV_jan2012-html.aspx
[3] http://http://www.element14.com/community/docs/DOC-42802
[4] http://http://www.element14.com/community/groups/robotics/blog/2011/09/12/quadcopter-robot-used-to-remotely-attack-wireless-networks