



CLOSE CALLS NOT COMMON, STILL CONCERNING FOR MANNED AND UNMANNED AIRCRAFT PILOTS

News / Airlines



Operators of **unmanned aircraft** may not be as reckless as data released from the Federal Aviation Administration at first seemed to portray them, according to a third-party analysis released Monday.

The Academy of Model Aeronautics, an advocacy organization for model aircraft pilots, analyzed reports of unmanned aircraft incidents and found a large majority of incidents reported were simply sightings by flight crews and not near collisions as reported by national media outlets.

Out of 764 reports filed between November 2014 and August 2015, only 27 were explicitly described by observers as near-midair collisions.

"Without a doubt, there are some records of 'near misses' that represent actual safety concerns, and more needs to be done to address those," Dave Mathewson, executive director of AMA, said in a statement Monday. "But our analysis also found that the number of 'near misses' is substantially lower than the number that was previously presented."

The reports span military and civilian use and contain sightings of other objects--including a report of a UFO--that can be confused with unmanned aircraft during flight or other aircraft flying within federal guidelines, according to the AMA.

While the AMA report shows near-collisions aren't as widespread as previously thought, those in the unmanned aircraft systems industry acknowledge there are still irresponsible operators out there.

"The report definitely does highlight that it's a dangerous game, " said Matt Dunlevy, president of Grand Forks-based company SkySkopes, which uses unmanned aircraft to conduct structure inspections and take video.

Local sightings

Two of the 764 sightings reported to the FAA came from North Dakota.

In April, a **pilot** training at Grand Forks International Airport noticed a unmanned aircraft flying at 1,400 feet but noted no evasive action was taken.

Three months later, a pilot observed an unmanned aircraft at 2,700 feet about three miles east of Fargo's Hector International Airport but took no evasive action.

Dunlevy points to the Grand Forks incident as an example of irresponsible flight by a unmanned aircraft pilot.

"That one was flying in the traffic pattern, which is just ludicrous," he said.

Under current FAA guidelines, users of unmanned aircraft are prohibited from approaching manned aircraft or interfering with their flight. UAS operators also must contact the control tower of an airport if they plan to fly within five miles of it.

Recreational users of small UAS--defined as a device weighing less than 55 pounds--are told to fly no higher than 400 feet, but they can fly higher if given permission by the FAA through a certificate of authorization.

Improper use

In Minnesota, six unmanned aircraft sightings were reported by pilots from 2014 to 2015.

The presence of unmanned aircraft near wildfires prompted the state's Department of Natural Resources to put out a warning this spring asking operators to keep their aircraft away from firefighting planes.

If a UAS is spotted in an area where these planes are flying, the DNR planes are grounded.

"It's only going to take one of those people flying over those wildfires, taking down a helicopter that's trying to put out a wildfire to ruin it for everyone else who's playing nice and doing the right thing by safely integrating UAS," Dunlevy said.

The FAA can fine careless or reckless operators up to \$25,000, though the AMA found in almost 20 percent of the reports that local law enforcement wasn't notified or it was unknown if local law enforcement was notified.

The FAA does have a "Know Before You Fly" campaign that aims to educate operators about the basics of flying unmanned aircraft legally and safely. Some of those guidelines have been authored by the AMA.

"AMA has worked closely with the FAA for many years, and we continue to consider the agency a partner in promoting model aircraft and consumer drone safety," Mathewson said.

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