

CORONAVIRUS BUSINESS UPDATE

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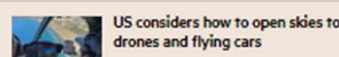
Latest on Drones



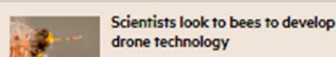
US police launch 'homeless outreach' drones during crisis



California police to use drones to patrol lockdown



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US regulator grants exemption for drone flight during lockdown

Oil and gas company in Texas given approval to use unmanned aircraft to inspect vital infrastructure



An Optimus drone approved by the FAA during Covid-19 shutdowns © Airobotics

Patrick McGee APRIL 23 2020

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The US Federal Aviation Administration has offered its first coronavirus-related waiver for drone flight, allowing an oil and gas company in Houston, Texas, to use unmanned aircraft instead of humans to inspect its facilities while staff remain confined in lockdown.

The company, which regulators have not named, [received permission](#) this month to use industrial drones made by Airobotics, a US-Israeli start-up, to surveil critical infrastructure. The waiver allows for flying beyond the pilot's line of sight — something usually banned by the FAA.

Waivers for the commercial drone industry are common, but this is the first specifically related to the pandemic, which has dramatically increased demand for unmanned services such as contactless delivery and aerial surveillance.

According to Lisa Ellman, partner at Hogan Lovells who worked with Airobotics, the request was “expedited because of the virus”, winning approval within 24 hours of an April 5 application. “That’s amazing for the FAA,” she said. “They understood the urgency.”

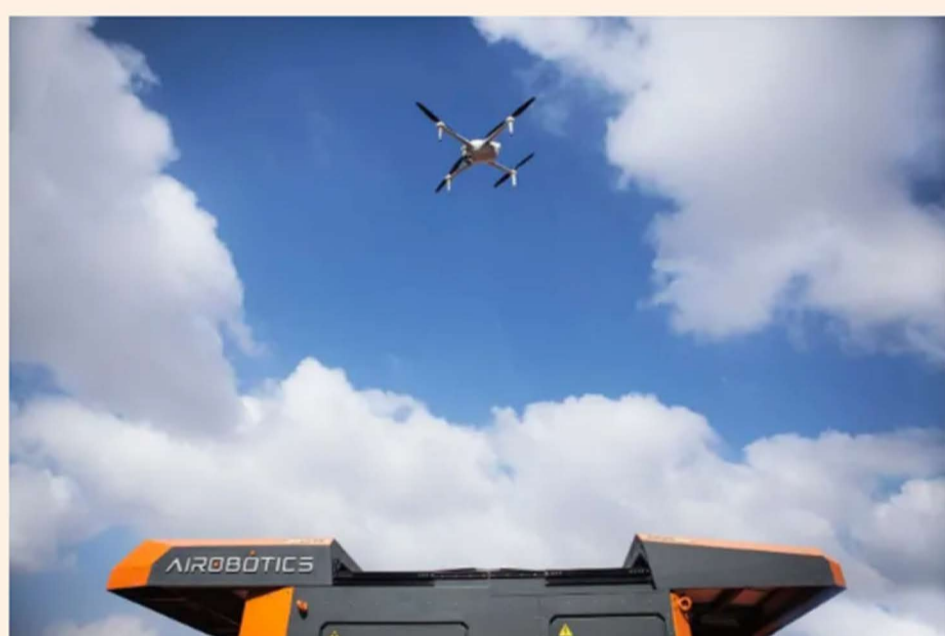
The waiver extends until June 30 or “the expiration of the federal, state, or local Covid-19 recommendations or requirements”.

Regulation has long proven a hurdle to the commercial rollout of drones, as governments grapple with the complex task of co-ordinating skies full of unmanned aircraft. But in light of the FAA’s exemption, many companies now hope a precedent has been set for more wide-scale flying.

William Walsh, partner at Cozen O’Connor, said the exemption marked the FAA’s first concrete response to a [White House directive](#), issued on March 17, which called on all agencies to relax regulations wherever they might ease the impact of Covid-19 on businesses.

“The institutional culture of the FAA weighs against doing anything quickly,” he said. “I think what this crisis provides is an opportunity to change that paradigm.”

The action from the FAA is likely to be widely welcomed by executives in the drone industry, many of whom have expressed frustration that US policymakers have been slow to respond to a fast-moving technology with myriad use cases.



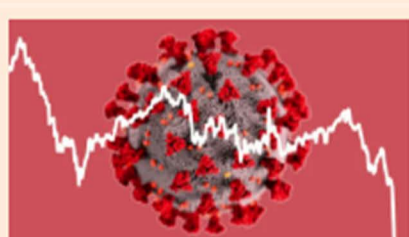
Airobotics drones have their own robotic landing box for autonomous operations © Airobotics

However, some argue that the single exemption is less a harbinger of further relaxations than simply a strategic move by the FAA to demonstrate its willingness to assist with the virus effort. “If that’s all we see, it’s hard to feel it’s all that genuine,” said Mr Walsh.

Amit Ganjoo, chief executive of Anra Technologies, which develops unmanned aircraft airspace management systems, said he expected that quarantined cities would be a catalyst for all sorts of select drone operations across the country.

“As long as the provider is able to prove a safety case, I don’t see why the FAA won’t approve,” he said. “I’m positive there will be some approvals for beyond-line-of-sight deliveries. It’s a no-brainer.”

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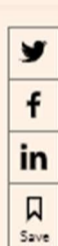
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Some companies are already making plans to expand their operations in the hope of gaining expedited regulatory approval. Andreas Raptopoulos, chief executive of Matternet, an urban aerial delivery company that has partnered with UPS to transfer medical supplies between hospitals, said he planned to accelerate expansion in the US from a few trials to servicing 10 hospitals by the end of the year — if the FAA permits it.

“We continue to work with the FAA on everything they request from us to prove that this is safe,” he said. “We hope that we get authorisation in time so it’s still relevant to be able to help with the crisis.”

Additional reporting by Kiran Stacey



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