News Article

Small Drones to Be Selected for Border Patrol Demos (Corrected)

- DHS is in the market for small drones to patrol the border
- Facial recognition, search and rescue capabilities will be key

By Avery Ellfeldt | June 28, 2018 6:26PM ET

(Corrects dollar figure for drone cost in fourth paragraph, adds wording on usage in second paragraph)

Between 15 and 20 small drone and sensor suppliers will be selected Friday by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to demonstrate their wares before they can compete to have their devices used to patrol U.S. borders.

Twenty-eight suppliers responded to a DHS request for information (RFI) posted April 30, announcing the agency was in the market for small drones to be evaluated for use along U.S. borders. The Robotic Aircraft Sensor Program – Borders demonstrations are expected by DHS to run between August and June of 2019 in Mississippi's pine belt forests at the Camp Shelly Unmanned Aircraft Facility in Hattiesburg.

According to the RFI, the demonstrations will be useful for the first responder community and various agencies under Homeland Security — they will be attended by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the FBI and the U.S Marshals Service representatives.

Photo - Spencer Platt/Getty Images

A sign welcomes people to the U.S. from Mexico on June 25, 2018 in Brownsville, Texas. The government will take a closer look at using small drones to help patrol the border.

"Most [agencies] are probably going to be buying higher quality UAS's than these hobbyists have out there. According to which one they pick, [the cost] is going to go from probably around $20,000 up to $100,000 apiece," Tim Bennett, the air-based technologies program manager at the DHS, told Bloomberg Government.

On the Ground

Bennett said the small drones and sensors chosen to fly in Hattiesburg are more advanced than drones used for recreational purposes, but also vary greatly from what U.S. Customs and Border Protection currently uses: MQ-9's or Predator B drones.

According to CBP, the MQ-9's have a maximum weight of 10,500 pounds, are controlled remotely, and are used for long-term information gathering rather than daily missions or search-and-rescue type operations. Bennett said the demonstrations will provide agencies with information about what types — and quantities — of drones and sensors would be useful to individual agents in daily tactical missions.

"What we're looking at is smalls, which are 55 pounds or less," said Bennett. "The ones who will use the smalls will be the Border Patrol, a different group within CBP. They're going to be used a lot for immediate situation awareness. These guys are on the ground and a lot of times in really hilly or valley areas where they can't see what's going on."

The drones selected for demonstrations will be subject to varying scenarios in Hattiesburg to see if they are capable of tasks including facial recognition, subject tracking and operating in the dark, according to the RFI. Bennett said the drones will likely be tested in six to eight different scenarios to gauge which sensors will be most effective in different border missions.

"It's definitely not a surprise that DHS is pursuing the acquisition and use of small drones," said Matthew Feeney, the director of the Cato Institute Project on Emerging Technologies. "They're very different kinds of machines with very different capabilities. The smaller drones are going to be covering a much smaller area of course, than a Reaper [another version of the MQ-9] drone."
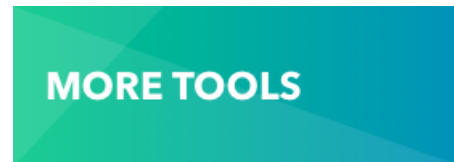
The demonstrations will begin in August, with each selected supplier having one week to show off their devices to the government agencies.

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