

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105189](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Drones can provide significant social and economic benefits. For example, drones can be used to inspect infrastructure, aid in disaster and wildfire response, and deliver medical supplies.

GAO was asked to review FAA's efforts to integrate drones into the national airspace system. This report examines, among other issues, the extent to which: (1) FAA's approach to managing its drone integration efforts is consistent with key elements for a comprehensive strategy and (2) FAA has clearly communicated its requirements and process for reviewing and approving operational requests.

GAO analyzed FAA's planning documents and reports. GAO interviewed FAA officials, eight participants in one of FAA's pilot programs, and 15 industry groups, representing manufacturers, operators, and others. GAO selected industry stakeholders due to their participation in FAA pilot programs and rulemaking advisory committees, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that FAA: (1) develop a drone integration strategy that includes all elements of a comprehensive strategy and (2) evaluate its current documentation to identify options to more clearly communicate how applicants can satisfy drone operational request requirements and FAA's process for reviewing and approving operational requests. FAA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105189](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or krauseh@gao.gov.

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DRONES

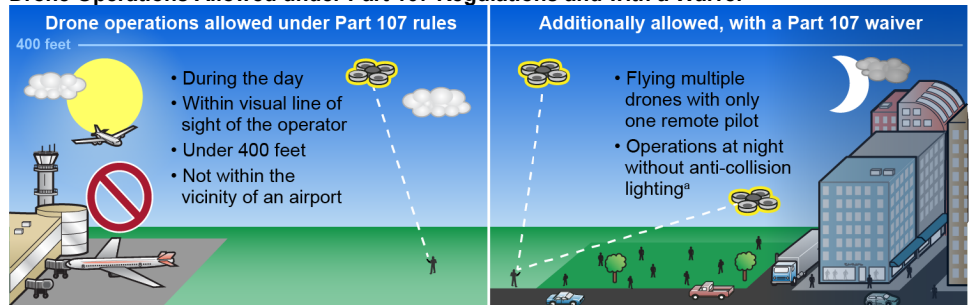
FAA Should Improve Its Approach to Integrating Drones into the National Airspace System

What GAO Found

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is responsible for safely integrating drones into the national airspace system—a complex network that includes airports, aircraft, and air traffic control facilities. FAA has developed various planning documents to manage its drone integration efforts but has not developed a comprehensive strategy. GAO found that FAA's documents partially include four of the seven elements of a comprehensive strategy but do not include the remaining three elements. For example, FAA's documents describe activities that are completed, under way, and planned. However, the documents do not identify drone integration goals and objectives and partially include milestones and performance measures for all activities. FAA officials stated they are developing a drone integration strategy. However, the strategy's release has been delayed multiple times, and whether the strategy will provide a comprehensive approach is unclear. Establishing a strategy with all key elements is critical to FAA's ability to effectively manage its drone integration efforts.

FAA has not clearly communicated: how drone operators' requests to conduct advanced operations can meet specific requirements or what is FAA's process for reviewing and approving those requests. Currently, drone operators seeking to conduct advanced operations not allowed under existing rules must submit operational requests by applying for waivers or exemptions to conduct these operations (see example in fig.). However, more than half of 15 industry stakeholders told GAO that FAA has not clearly communicated the requirements it looks for when reviewing and approving advanced operations. As a result, they faced challenges working with multiple FAA offices on these requests. For example, stakeholders said they experienced lengthy reviews of their requests, and at times received conflicting information from different FAA offices. FAA officials said that they recognize that their process for reviewing operational requests is complex and that they plan to take steps to improve FAA's guidance. By more clearly communicating how to satisfy FAA's requirements and FAA's process for reviewing operational requests, applicants could be better positioned to provide FAA with the quality information needed to assess these requests.

Drone Operations Allowed under Part 107 Regulations and with a Waiver



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Aviation Administration information. | GAO-23-105189

^aPilots may fly at night if they have completed an initial knowledge test or training under 14 C.F.R. § 107.65 after April 6, 2021. In addition, the drone must have lighted anti-collision lighting visible for at least 3 statute miles that has a flash rate sufficient to avoid a collision. 14 C.F.R. § 107.29.