

THE RISE OF THE COUNTER-DRONE INDUSTRY

This was predictable.

After Congress pushed for years for the Federal Aviation Administration to rush through permissions to let drones fly above America, local authorities are discovering what countries throughout the Middle East at least pay lip service to: having drones flying freely overhead undermine the illusion of sovereign law on the ground.

As concerns rise about a security menace posed by rogue drone flights, U.S. government agencies are working with state and local police forces to develop high-tech systems to protect vulnerable sites, according to sources familiar with the matter.

[snip]

Asked about the development of counter-drone-technology, the Department of Homeland Security said it “works side-by-side with our interagency partners” to develop solutions to address the unlawful use of drones. Officials with the Defense Department, FAA and New York Police Department declined to comment.

But the sources acknowledged that efforts to combat rogue drones have gained new urgency due to the sharp rise in drone use and a series of alarming incidents.

The number of unauthorized drone flights has surged over the past year, raising concerns that one could hit a commercial aircraft during landing or take-off, or be used as a weapon in a deliberate attack, the sources said.

Drones have flown perilously close to airliners, interfered with firefighting operations, been used to transport illegal drugs into the United States from Mexico, and sparked a security scare at the White House, among other incidents.

But U.S. authorities have limited tools for identifying drone operators, many of them hobbyists, who violate federal rules that drones fly no higher than 400 feet (120 meters) and no closer than 5 miles (8 km) to airports. One reason for the enforcement gap is that Congress in 2012 barred the FAA from regulating recreational drones.

A system capable of disabling a drone and identifying its operator would give law enforcement officials practical powers to block the flights.

The all-American solution, of course, is more products, more profit. Most of the rest of the article describes efforts to develop technology that can ID and take control of drones deemed by authorities to be operating illegally (though of course such technology could just as easily be used to limit the flight of a media drone tracking police abuse).

There's no thought, in the article, of the alternative: slowing the enthusiastic roll-out of drones until issues of basic governance can be worked out (or until people realize that drones pose fairly unique challenge to governance as we have it now). Doing that would not only eliminate the opportunity to grow yet another new market for previously unnecessary technology, but raise uncomfortable questions about how we operated our unlawful drones around the world.

Update: As bloopie2 pointed out, a guy in San Diego just got busted for killing a drone surveilling him at the beach with his tee shirt.

And the WaPo reports there have been hundreds of near-misses between drones and planes that the FAA doesn't want to tell us about.