

Fighting pigs from the sky: Drones to help farmers trap feral swine under FAA program

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UAV pilots Jared Langley, 31, and Cory Vinger, 24, work together to fly a FreeFly ALTA 8 octocopter in Grand Forks, N.D., in this file photo from 2017. (Photo: Trevor Hughes, USA TODAY)

Farmers in Oklahoma are getting a helping hand from drones as they fight an unusual menace: the \$2 billion problem posed by wild pigs.

Members of the Choctaw Nation in central Oklahoma deploy the drones as part of a national experiment launched by the Federal Aviation Administration in May that will also see drones deliver medical supplies in Nevada and spray insecticides on mosquitoes in Florida. It's part of a fast-growing industry with the potential to transform deliveries, farming and construction, help communities recover faster from disasters and reduce congestion on roads.

"We want to make more things possible," said James Grimsley, the president and CEO of drone company DII, which works with the Choctaw Nation. Drones drop dried corn into traps used to capture wild pigs, which destroy crops and can pollute water sources.

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Dropping the corn from remotely piloted drones reduces the amount of time and gas farmers need to refill the traps by hand, and trapping the pigs more effectively will help reduce about \$2 billion in damage they cause annually. FAA approval of the test program allows the drones to fly at night and out of sight of the pilot, both of which are usually banned.

"We see drones as an extension of smart farming technology. Drones provide that next step toward robotics and automation," said Mike Komp, an agricultural drone expert at the Noble Research Institute in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Noble's scientists advise the Choctaw Nation drone program.

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The new FAA drone test program has sites across the country: In Reno, Nevada, drone company Flirtey tests ways to deliver defibrillators to people having heart attacks. In Fort Myers, Florida, a mosquito control district will use drones to spray insecticide and scan for baby mosquitoes in remote areas. In Alaska, drone pilots will test

ways to inspect oil pipelines while reducing conflicts with piloted planes, which often navigate across remote areas by flying above and along pipelines.

Scientists and pilots are scrambling to adapt the nation's airspace to drones, which are far easier to fly than small airplanes but can pose a risk to passenger jets or nearby buildings if not operated safely. Intel works with the Choctaw Nation to test a new system for teaching drones from different companies to communicate so they can avoid collisions.

Drone-based companies could be worth \$82 billion and create 100,000 jobs within the next 10 years, and the FAA test examines both practical applications and potential dangers posed by widespread commercial drone flights.

FAA regulators worry that opening the nation's airspace to more drones could jeopardize the country's long-standing safety record for flight. But using drones could also reduce the number of vehicles on the road, improving safety there. That's one of the reasons retail giant Amazon has been experimenting with drone deliveries.

"The public has no tolerance for aviation mishaps," Grimsley said. "We are much more tolerant of safety mishaps on the ground, compared to the air, (but) a lot of injuries and deaths occur due to vehicle accidents, so we looked at mundane things that drones could do."

More: [Flirtey sees EpiPens, Narcan in future as AED drone delivery expands](#)

