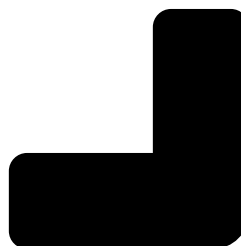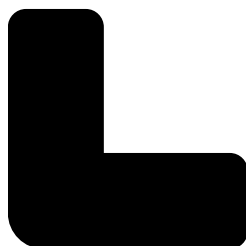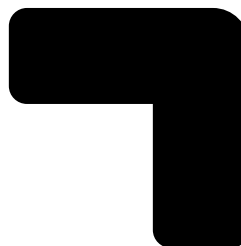# Pittsburg County considered for Choctaw drone program

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Staff Writer Derrick James, of the *News-Capital*, flies a drone as it ascends on Thursday. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has been named as one of 10 selectees named by the U.S. Department of Transportation to conduct a drone pilot program for the Federal Aviation Administration.

[Photo by Kevin Harvison | Photo editor](#)

Remote parts of Pittsburg, Atoka and Pushmataha counties are expected to be included in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's participation in a new drone project involving the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Details are still being worked out regarding the Choctaw Nation's participation in the new drone project — officially called the Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration Pilot Program.

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao announced Wednesday that the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is among 10 chosen for the program from a pool of more than 200 tribal, state and city governments — and on Thursday, Brian Post of Choctaw Global, a subsidiary company, was in Washington gathering more information.

"We just came from our first orientation with the FAA, going over the next steps," Post said from Washington on Thursday afternoon. "The first step is to work out a memorandum of understanding agreement with the FAA."

The research and testing program is designed to provide an opportunity for the Choctaw Nation work with the private sector to speed-up the safe integration of drones, or Unmanned Aircraft Systems, into airspace. Through the program, the Choctaw Nation and other participants can partner with drone manufacturers and operators.

Money for the project is expected to come from private industries or companies, and not from the FAA or federal Department of Transportation.

"We're working with private companies," Post said. "The FAA did not put any funding into it."

Those partnering with the Choctaw Nation on the drone research project include the Cable News Network, or CNN; Flirtey, AiRXOS, a GE venture; uAvionix, AirMap, TDRS,LLC; DII,LLC; Noble Research Institute, LLC; Green Valley Farms Living Laboratory, Oklahoma State University Unmanned Systems Research Institute (USRI) and the University of Oklahoma.

That's according to Kristina L. Humenesky of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

The idea is to provide research to assist the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Aviation Administration in the drafting of new rules that would allow more complex operations by drones, or unmanned aircraft at low altitudes.

Post said some new buildings are expected to be constructed as part of the project, with much of the field work expected to be conducted in remote parts of southeastern Oklahoma. Post said they are still trying to work out the details.

"We've got some remote locations in the Choctaw Nation," Post noted. "The Choctaw Nation owns a lot of land."

Remote locations are needed to conduct some of the drone flights away from airspace at airports and also to avoid more populated areas. That's where rural parts of Pittsburg, Atoka and Pushmataha counties could be utilized.

"The majority of what we're doing will be mobile," Post said.

Gearing up will take some time, but the Choctaw Nation and its partners, as well as the federal government agencies involved, are anxious to get started.

"We've got some immediate deadlines," Post said, with a media event expected in the first 90 days.

"We're excited to be selected," Post said. "We have a strong team."

Choctaw Chief Gay Batton issued a statement saying the Choctaw Nation is excited about the announcement from the Department of Transportation and he believes it reflects well on the continued work and efforts to identify and grow economic opportunities for the region.

"We realize this has the potential to change our daily lives in many positive ways," Batton said. "This program will foster and create technology and creativity in a safe environment."

Oklahoma's U.S. Senator James Inhofe, a member of the U.S. Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee also announced the Choctaw Nation's selection for the project. He said the announcement highlights the technological accomplishments and abilities of the Choctaw Nation on a national scale.

"I am pleased that this competitive pilot program will also bring jobs, educational opportunities and economic growth to the Southeastern Oklahoma," Inhofe said in a statement from his office. "Congratulations to the Choctaw Nation and I look forward to continuing to work with you on this important initiative."

Oklahoma U.S. Senator James Lankford also issued a statement and said he joined the Oklahoma Congressional delegation in sending a letter to the DOT supporting the Choctaw Nation's application.

"I congratulate the Choctaw Nation on their selection to participate in the DOT's pilot program to examine how the public and private sector can work together to integrate cutting-edge technology into the already complex airspace," Lankford said.

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the other nine entities working with the program will be charged with determining ways to balance local and national interests as drones continue to be integrated into airspace, according to the FAA.

Another key component involves improving communications between state, local and tribal jurisdictions as related to Unmanned Aircraft Systems use.

The program also calls for privacy and security risks to be addressed.

With work done through the UAS Integration Pilot Program, the U.S. Department of Transportation and the FAA hope to accelerate the process of getting operations approved that now require special authorization.

The Choctaw Nation and others selected for the program are expected to evaluate a number of actions associated with drones, or Unmanned Aircraft Systems, according to the FAA, including:

• Night flights.

• Flights over people.

• Flights when drones are out of the pilot's sight.

• Delivering packages.

• Technology concerning detection and avoidance.

The program will also include research relating to the security of data links between the aircraft and pilot.

Areas cited by the FAA that could see immediate benefits from the program include emergency management. The Pittsburg County Office of Emergency Management already has a drone that can be operated by Emergency Management Director Kevin Enloe.

The FAA noted other areas that could benefit from the program include photography, commerce and agriculture. Unmanned Aircraft Systems could also be used in the inspection of buildings, roads, bridges and other infrastructure, noted the FAA.

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