




Memorandum

Date: March 13, 2024

Subject: INFORMATION: Audit Announcement | FAA's Efforts To Establish a Regulatory Framework for Beyond Visual Line of Sight Drone Operations | Project No. 24A3002A000
Federal Aviation Administration

From: Nelda Z. Smith 
Assistant Inspector General for Aviation Audits

To: Director, Audit and Evaluation

The United States prioritizes leadership in the global aeronautics industry, which includes enabling the comprehensive integration of new technologies such as unmanned and autonomous operations.¹ Nationwide interest in using unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), commonly referred to as "drones," in complex operations beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS)² is expanding. According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), there were more than 369,000 registered commercial drones in the United States as of December 2023, and the Agency forecasts this number will increase to nearly 1 million commercial drone aircraft by 2027. While there are challenges and safety risks associated with integrating drones into the National Airspace System, advancing BVLOS drone operations is an important part of maintaining American technological leadership. These operations can also provide safety benefits across transportation modes. For example, drones can perform dangerous bridge inspections or replace vehicles on roads, reducing the risk of accidents and loss of life.

FAA has efforts underway to help advance routine BVLOS operations. These efforts include flight testing as part of partnership programs with Government and industry stakeholders and addressing recommendations from a BVLOS rulemaking committee.³ However, FAA has yet to establish new regulations to advance BVLOS operations beyond the parameters of existing drone regulations. Most commercial drone operators currently conduct operations under FAA's

¹ National Science and Technology Council, *National Aeronautics Science & Technology Priorities*, March 20, 2023.

² Flights where the unmanned aircraft operates outside of the direct visual line of sight of the remote pilot, which can increase operational efficiencies and cost effectiveness.

³ FAA, Unmanned Aircraft Systems Beyond Visual Line of Sight Aviation Rulemaking Committee, *Final Report*, March 10, 2022.

small UAS regulation,⁴ which limits flights to certain areas and conditions unless the operators obtain waivers or regulatory exemptions. Additionally, the small UAS regulation does not address the complexities of using drones specifically for BVLOS operations, including pilot and technology requirements.

We are initiating this audit to continue our oversight of FAA's drone integration efforts for complex BVLOS operations due to their importance for maintaining U.S. leadership in aeronautics as well as their potential for introducing risks to the National Airspace System. Accordingly, our audit objective is to assess FAA's efforts to establish a regulatory framework for BVLOS drone operations.

We plan to begin the audit this month and will contact your audit liaison to schedule an entrance conference. We will conduct our work at FAA Headquarters and selected field locations. If you have any questions, please contact me or Robin Koch, Program Director.

cc: DOT Audit Liaison, M-1
FAA Audit Liaison, AAE-100

⁴ Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems, 14 Code of Federal Regulations Part 107.