



AVIATION SAFETY AT RISK AS DRONE SALES SOAR

News / Airlines



When the pilot of an Alitalia jetliner reported seeing a **drone** while approaching New York's Kennedy Airport in 2013, the likelihood of a collision between a drone and a commercial jet seemed pretty remote.

But over the past two years, aviation experts and regulators in the US have become increasingly concerned about the growing number of drones flying near airports and the risks they could potentially create for **aviation safety**.

Last Saturday, for instance, a California Highway Patrol helicopter nearly crashed into a drone and the pilot avoided a collision only because he veered away.

"If it goes through the windshield and hits the pilot, that's game over," highway patrol spokesman Jim Andrews told local media.

But while the number of drones is soaring, their impact on flight safety is still being debated. More than 400,000 drones were sold in the US last year and this year the Consumer Technology

Association expects sales of 700,000 more.

In August, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said reports of close calls by pilots had soared, even though FAA rules prohibit flying drones near airports. It pointed to instances in which firefighters battling wildfires had to ground their operations after spotting drones nearby.

Drone enthusiasts say the FAA is sensationalising the issue as it seeks to regulate the flying of drones. Critics, for instance, say laser beams pointed at pilots are a far bigger and more malicious threat. There have been more than 5,000 reports of lasers aimed at airplanes, a number that has risen over the past few years, say pilot representatives. Also, about 13,000 bird strikes, a known threat to aviation safety, were recorded last year, according to FAA statistics.

The FAA itself has found only two instances of possible drone collisions with an aircraft, but has not been able to confirm either episode, according to a spokesman.

But CEO Hulsey Smith of Aero Kinetics, which makes commercial drones, said the risks of accidentally flying into the path of an airplane or a helicopter was statistically "just a matter of time".

"The general public has no sense of how dangerous these toys really are," he said. "If we don't have an honest conversation about those risks, we could set this industry back years and decades."

The FAA is considering registering drone buyers. Regulators are also working on new rules for commercial drone operators, which will bar drones from flying above 150m or faster than 160kmh.

Operators will also have to maintain a line of sight with drones. Mr Hulsey said registering drone owners is a necessary first step but not enough. He supports setting up a system to certify a drone's airworthiness, and possibly equipping drones with costly tracking beacons or collision avoidance systems.

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