

Idaho drone company first to receive ag exemption

Operators hope to confirm savings for farmers

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

A newly formed consortium of Northwest companies is the first to receive an exemption from federal aviation regulations to use unmanned aerial vehicles in agriculture.

Advanced Aviation Solutions in Star, Idaho, and Empire Airlines in Hayden, Idaho, are forming Empire Unmanned, to be based in Hayden, which will do agriculture flying. The company recently received an exemption from the Federal Aviation Administration to fly commercially, providing a service to farmers and other agribusinesses.

"Being the first is always a big deal," said Robert Blair, a partner in Advanced Aviation Solutions and a wheat farmer in Kendrick, Idaho.

Empire Unmanned will serve Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon and Idaho using UAVs for crop scans to make management



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Brad Ward and Robert Blair prepare a demonstration of an unmanned aerial vehicle during a precision agriculture field day on the University of Idaho's Parker Farm in June 2014 in Moscow. The Federal Aviation Administration recently approved an exemption for Empire Unmanned, a consortium in which Ward and Blair are partners, to fly UAVs for commercial use, the first company in agriculture to receive such an exemption.

decisions.

"Intuitively, we know that precision agriculture is going to increase yields and reduce inputs," said Brad Ward, vice president of Advanced Aviation Solutions.

"Industry-wide, there's no concrete information to say percentages that this is going to save the farmer on both sides, but we know it does."

The company is discussing

working with Washington State University and the University of Idaho to support research and determine actual increases.

"Having another layer of information from the air is go-

ing to add to the farmer's decision-making ability," Ward said.

The FAA exemption for Empire Unmanned covers a specific UAV called an eBee. The company picked that model because it already had FAA documentation and did not have to be evaluated for airworthiness, Blair said.

Under the exemption, the UAV can operate at altitudes lower than 400 feet, with the UAV within line of sight, for a half-hour of flight time.

The exemption requires that the UAV operator have a private pilot's license.

Farmers cannot use UAVs for scouting their fields.

"They can fly as a hobby, but the minute they take pictures and use it for management decisions, they are breaking the law," Blair said. "Growers now have a legal means to be able to use UAVs to fly their fields, they can use us as a service."

The FAA can levy a \$10,000 fine for breaking the rules, Ward said.

"This is conjecture, but there are probably people who are cheating on that rule, sure," he said.

Ward believes the FAA wants

to develop a special operator's certification for UAVs. They use pilot certification currently because private pilots have the necessary skills, he said.

"Eventually I think we will see an (unmanned aircraft system) operator's certificate that's within the reach of most farmers," he said.

Blair believes the company will be a test case for the FAA for future commercial use in agriculture, considering safety protocols and less-restrictive flying requirements.

Empire Unmanned is the 13th company to receive an exemption, Ward said, and the first for agriculture. Other exemptions have been granted to companies in the motion picture, energy, surveying and real estate industries.

The company applied for the exemption last July.

Blair estimates he could increase value by \$10 per acre by using UAVs to monitor his fields.

"If we can identify things that need to be done during the growing season, we can start adding a couple dollars an acre here or there and be a lot more efficient," he said.



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JOEY MEYER

Tillamook, Oregon FFA Chapter




I'm not your typical FFA member. I didn't grow up on a farm and before my freshman year of high school I had never heard of the FFA. I can still remember the event that changed the course of my life forever just before my freshman year: it was my freshman orientation meeting. My family and I were there to learn about classes the next year and the process for registering. Then my Ag teacher, Mr. Sherman, got up and started talking about the agriculture program. At first I wasn't really interested, until he mentioned one key thing: tractor driving. Now being a 14-year-old teenager I was naturally very excited to learn how to drive and I thought driving a tractor would be a great place to start so I signed up for the freshman ag class. Of course, as I had no prior driving experience I wasn't very good at tractor driving but it did get me into the class.

As the class progressed I started enjoying what I was learning more and more. We were learning shop skills, horticulture, animal science and many other things as well as about the FFA. Even though it sounded interesting I was still reluctant to get involved until we started doing parliamentary procedure in class. I loved everything about it from making debates to competing with my classmates so when my advisor asked for volunteers to make a freshman team I jumped in feet first. The team I joined that year won districts and did well at sectionals. That was my first experience with the FFA and I was hooked.

As a sophomore, I became historian of the chapter and did my first agriscience project. That project was about creating fuel pellets from methane digested pulp and I ended up using a tire jack to make the pellets and a bomb calorimeter made out of coffee can to test them. I had no idea at the time that this project would take me to I-SWEEP, an international fair in Houston, Texas and to the National FFA Convention. These successes gave me confidence and helped me to come out of my shell more. I continued my project the next year and to my surprise I was invited to a fair called INESPO in Amsterdam and although I didn't win anything it was one of the most incredible trips of my life. I had only

been out of the state a few times so finding myself in Europe seeing buildings that are older than our country was quite an experience. I also became vice-president of the FFA chapter and went back to nationals with my project. This brought me to my senior year and in the midst of looking at colleges and taking tests I started a new science project looking at air emissions from burning chicken litter. I went two international fairs that year and national and took first place at the Genius Olympiad in New York and at Nationals.

I finished out my FFA career this year when I returned to nationals to receive my American degree. There I had the chance to look back at my time in the FFA and it still shocks me how far I have come. When I entered high school I was a shy freshman with little to no leadership or public speaking experience. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to do with my life. Now that's all changed. I am confident in myself and my beliefs. I have become a leader, a world traveler, an agriculturalist, and discovered a passion for teaching others about agriculture and science. It was as an FFA member, while working with younger students and presenting my project that I realized that I wanted to become a high school agriculture and science teacher. In the end one thing means more to me than anything else the FFA has given me and that is the friends I have made. When I entered high school I was a shy freshman who didn't have a ton of friends. Now I have great friends from my chapter, all over the state, around the nation, and even in other countries. The FFA has changed my entire life from the people I know to the career I have chosen and has given me so much along the way. It still shocks me to think that all of this goes back to my ag teacher mentioning tractor driving to freshman. I just hope one day I can make an impact in the lives of my students the way my ag teacher did for me.

Joey is currently an Ag Science and Biology double major at Oregon State University and plans to enter a Masters program in Agricultural Education next year.

For information on how you can support Oregon FFA, contact Kevin White at 541-604-1350.

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