

Agricultural pilot denied use of Pendleton airport

Safety concerns raised over drone range

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — The owner of a crop dusting business says the city of Pendleton will not let him operate at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport because of safety concerns at the adjacent Unmanned Aerial Systems Range.

Andrew Kilgore, who runs K2 Aerial Application, already flies out of Hermiston and Boardman and wants to add Pendleton to that list. But he said the city will not give him permission to load his plane with fertilizer and herbicides at the airport, citing a conflict with the nearby UAS test range.

Kilgore's attorney, Michael Schultz, said he is optimistic they can find a solution. Traditional crop services and drones need not be exclusive, he added.



AP Photo

The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton refuses to let an aerial applicator operate there out of fear his airplane would conflict with an adjacent drone test range.

"We're not asking for special treatment," Schultz said. "We just want (Kilgore) to have the opportunity to use a public facility."

In a letter sent March 6 to Pendleton city manager Robb Corbett, Schultz said the city has no rational basis for limiting Kilgore from using the airport. Schultz said they would be happy to meet any lawful safety measure the city chooses to implement, but that has not been specified.

"Those concerns have not

been shared with us," he said.

Corbett and airport manager Steve Chrisman declined to comment through city attorney Nancy Kerns. There was, however, a Pendleton Airport Commission meeting scheduled for Wednesday to discuss temporarily closing its northern-most agricultural pad while UAS operations are relocated.

In an action item addressed to the commission, Chrisman said that the UAS range safety officer Darryl Abling has de-

termined that there is a safety risk to personnel and equipment by allowing operations at the launch pad.

"UAS operations are often testing new functionality ... and while every effort is made to mitigate the risks associated with new technology, things can go wrong when it is initially flight tested," Chrisman wrote. "Having non-participating personnel (or) equipment in the area poses an unnecessary risk should an anomaly occur."

Kilgore, 32, is a Pendleton native who returned home after serving in the Air Force and completing his flight training at Central Oregon Community College. He launched K2 Aerial Application in 2013 and serves farmers across Eastern Oregon.

Kilgore said he has received many requests to spray fields around Pendleton, which is why he approached the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport. Time is of the essence, he said, since many wheat farmers are already beginning to apply fertilizer to their fields.

Kilgore already shares the Boardman Airport with Aerovel Corp., another developer of small unmanned aircraft based in Washington. Tad McGeer, the company's president, said that he and Kilgore have no problems getting along.

"We let each other know what we're doing, and that's good enough," McGeer said. "I'm not aware of any reason why there should be a conflict."

In his letter to Corbett,

Schultz indicated that any safety concerns about UAV operations raise a dilemma for the city: Either the program is dangerous because the city has not worked out proper safety procedures, or it is not dangerous and the concerns are merely an excuse to discriminate against Kilgore.

"The city cannot have it both ways," Schultz wrote.

Furthermore, Schultz said farming is the economic basis for the community and the airport should be supportive of bringing in another service where farmers can have their crops sprayed for pests and diseases.

Kilgore has received signed letters of support from 16 farmers asking for the airport to make its facilities available.

"We believe this is an occasion to make additional crop services available for farmers," Schultz said.

Though Schultz said he and Kilgore are reviewing their legal options, he stopped short of saying they were considering a lawsuit.



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