

Environmental Policy Act will come into play, though he says the military has some exemptions to this ecological protection.

NEPA, Little says, “was passed to ensure that the environmental impacts of federal actions are reviewed and mitigated or avoided.” He says, “Since this proposal would authorize people to drive across public lands and test new types of aircraft over large tracts of sensitive high desert lands, their impacts must be assessed and alternatives must be developed to avoid those impacts.”

Male sage grouse congregate during the mating season in certain spots, called leks, year after year, display their plumage and strut their stuff to attract a mate. Disturbed lek sites and habitat have been a factor in the decline of the sage grouse, Little says.

In addition to sage grouse, the areas are home to elk, mule deer and antelope. Little says ONDA wants to “prevent any impacts to proposed wilderness areas and certain types of wildlife habitats.”

Humans enjoy the solitude and wildness of those areas as well, and a key to wilderness is keeping it “untrammeled by man,” according to the Wilderness Act. So while people may hike and camp in wilderness areas, things that affect the nature of the area, such as road building, are not allowed.

If drones fly over these areas, Little asks, “what do you do when a drone crashes and you have to retrieve it?”

Hemingway says, “For the most part I think we can avoid the areas that are either proposed wilderness areas or the proposed

wilderness study areas.” He says, “If there is a situation where we need to fly over one, we would make sure we flew sufficiently high so that we would make sure not to disturb anyone on the ground, whether it was a person or a critter of some kind.”

In general, most of the drones “will fly between 1,500 and 3,000 feet above the ground,” Hemingway says. “They don’t generally hug the earth. There’s a ratio, the lower they fly, the closer they are going to fly to you.” He says the engines are small and “designed to be quiet; a lot of them are used for surveillance.”

DRONES IN CONGRESS

Versions of the FAA reauthorization bill have passed in the House and in the Senate. Only the Senate side contained Sen. Wyden’s proposal that would increase the number of testing sites for unmanned aerial vehicles from four to six and included language about diversity of geography, adding to the chances that a proposed testing area in Central Oregon would be included. The two versions of the bill must be reconciled before it can be signed into law, and contentious spending issues thus far have held up the process.

If the legislation passes, it would facilitate what would otherwise be a complicated regulatory process. Nonetheless, Lee and Hemingway say EDCO’s drone testing area proposal could still go forward, even without the bill.

Sen. Jeff Merkley was a cosponsor of Wyden’s amendment. The amendment

itself did not make it into S. 223, but the key language about expanding the number of test areas from Wyden and Schumer’s proposal did.

According to a list of 2011 defense appropriations requests submitted by Merkley, the senator asked for \$18 million in spending on technologies for unmanned vehicles. Merkley told *EW*, “I guess the way I see it is this is just the beginning of a conversation about an interesting idea.”

Rhetoric about drones and drone areas from Oregon’s Congressional delegation has centered on the civilian uses of the aircraft, not their military potential or the fact that the drone research is financed by the military.

In terms of drone ethics and worries that drones turn war into a videogame, Merkley says: “The question of utilizing an area to test drones for commercial use doesn’t specifically raise those issues because there’s a whole range of commercial issues.” The “primary role,” he says, of a drone is “surveillance.” But, he adds, when they are used to attack and destroy it’s the “same issues as with manned aircraft on when to utilize munitions.”

When he introduced the idea of expanding the drone testing areas on the Senate floor, Wyden said, “Growth in the unmanned aerial system sector in the aviation business has been extraordinary in just the last few years. I think it’s well known that the systems are proving critical to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they also have tremendous potential in the civilian sector.”

Wyden’s staff says he was unable to talk to *EW* directly due to his position on the Senate Intelligence Committee, but his Deputy Chief of Staff, Jennifer Hoelzer, says the issue for Wyden is ensuring the drones are tested in geographically diverse areas so Oregon can find out if they will be useful in this state’s public lands. “Senator Wyden’s legislation doesn’t take a position on the use of drones, it merely recognizes that there are potential uses and asks for their full range of uses to be studied,” Hoelzer says.

What Aguerre of Not 1 More Acre says needs to be studied is the effects of drones and “technology that watches all of us” on people and the environment. The U.S. is “putting public lands in harm’s way of these high tech systems,” she says. What are the ethics, Aguerre asks, of “allowing untested research and development of technology that most people in the U.S. do not even begin to understand the complexities of, much less have signed off on? We have not even begun to deal with the ethics of the technology itself.”

Aguerre says, “Always when people have sacrificed enough at war, usually a negotiated end can be achieved.” Drone warfare, she says, is a “subtle way of making war permanent by not asking: What is war?”

As drone technology draws closer to a Northwest home, it may be that Oregonians will be among the first to find out what happens when soldiers and civilians man spycraft and weapons from a distance that is at once geographic and ethical. **EW**



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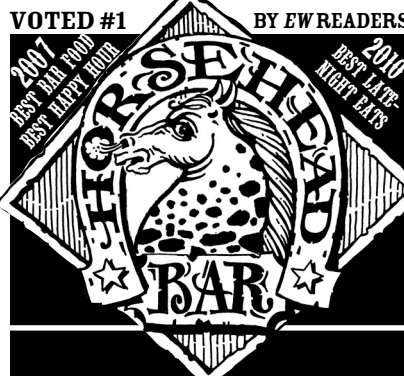
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