

Drone testing becoming more integrated into Pendleton

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Pendleton's drone testing program is starting to come off the hill.

In February, the unmanned aerial systems company Spright announced it was starting a proof-of-concept program with Interpath Laboratory and Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center to transport medical tests from Interpath facilities at 2640 S.W. Perkins Ave., Pendleton, to Yellowhawk's clinic in Mission.

Spright ran its first test in mid-February, but it was a long time in the making.

Pendleton Economic Development Director Steve Chrisman said the origins of Spright in Pendleton can be traced back to a conference sponsored by the Association for Unmanned Aerial Systems International last year.

"It was just kind of fortuitous, bumping into each other," he said.

Chrisman didn't bump into the people behind Spright, an Arizona subsidiary of a medical transport company, but instead found himself at the booth for Wingcopter, a German aerospace company that was situated across the way from Pendleton's booth. Chrisman began chatting with a man from Wingcopter, who told Chrisman the company was working with a customer who specialized in unmanned medical test delivery.

Chrisman connected the



Spright/Contributed Photo

The unmanned aerial systems company Spright in February 2022 tests a proof-of-concept program to transport medical tests from Interpath Laboratory, 2640 S.W. Perkins Ave., Pendleton, to Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center in Mission.

VERIZON STARTS TESTING AT PENDLETON UAS RANGE

PENDLETON — The telecom giant Verizon is now one of the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range's newest customers.

Verizon Robotics announced on Tuesday, March 15 that it is now running tests at the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range. According to a press release, testing at the range will focus on improving their research and development efforts, which will include training range staff in how to use a mobile command vehicle to communicate with its drones.

"The operations we are deploying at Pendleton Range will help advance R&D initiatives for customers," Verizon Robotics President Mariah

Scott said in a statement. "The range's location helps create a local innovation testbed that can emulate real-life conditions, helping to bring products and services to market faster." In the press release, Verizon touted its efforts at developing UAS software that will help integrate drones into the national airspace, which is the main reason the Federal Aviation Administration designated Pendleton and other communities around the country as designated test sites.

Verizon is just the latest large corporation to take an interest in Pendleton. Amazon recently confirmed that it was testing drones at the range.

dots between Interpath's presence in Pendleton and Spright, which eventually led to Spright renting a hangar from the Pendleton UAS Range.

In an email, Justin Steinke, Spright's vice president of operations, explained what drew the company to Pendleton. While Spright's unmanned vehicles are

undergoing the Federal Aviation Administration certification process, Steinke said Interpath and Pendleton offered the right conditions for it to test its product.

"Interpath Laboratory is located inside the current test range, which allows us to accelerate the testing of the aircraft and the business case," he wrote. "Having usable airspace to test and validate our operations in Pendleton is enabling Spright to accelerate the development of our solutions and more rapidly help people around the globe. Most importantly, Spright intends to continue to operate with Interpath after the testing phase is complete, making it an innovative win for the community of Pendleton."

Steinke said Spright intends to test for the next six to nine months in locations around Pendleton before making its product fully available next year.

Interpath CEO Tom Kennedy did not return a request for comment, but in a press release, he explained why the lab testing company would be interested in investing in drones.

"Medical laboratory services in rural areas frequently must invest intensive time and resources into sample pick-up," Kennedy said in a statement. "We anticipate Spright's drone delivery service will alleviate many of the drawbacks and costs associated with automobile-based delivery. This initiative represents an example of our embrace of innovative solutions that provide more efficient and effective services to our clients."

Yellowhawk became the third partner in the group

through Interpath, which processes the medical tests conducted at the Mission clinic.

Yellowhawk CEO Aaron Hines said the medical center was attracted to the test program because it could mean faster test results for their patients. As it stands now, an Interpath vehicle picks up tests at Yellowhawk once per day. But if UAS took over test delivery, Yellowhawk could deliver and receive tests multiple times per day, meaning their patients could be treated more quickly.

While Hines likes the idea, he said he would want to study a drone delivery system for a longer period of time before moving forward with it. He said he wants to know how test specimens might be affected should one of the drones fail and crash. And while drones might be more efficient, conventional vehicular transportation has a much longer track record.

To Chrisman, Spright's partnership with two well-known local entities is evidence UAS are closer to integrating into people's everyday lives.

In UAS range's earlier times, drone companies tended to conduct most of their testing at the Pendleton airport or in a secluded area far from public view. While many operations at the drone company still are opaque, Verizon and Amazon have recently confirmed, or even announced, their presence in Pendleton.



MonteVista Homes/Contributed Image

The Hermiston City Council, in its role as the Hermiston Urban Renewal Agency, during its meeting Monday, March 14, 2022, approved a resolution directing staff to prepare a plan for a new urban renewal district along Feedville Road to develop The Hayfields, a development that would add more than 1,300 homes to Hermiston.

Hayfield development could bring Hermiston more homes

By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — The Hayfields development would add more than 1,300 homes to Hermiston.

The 353-acre site is in the city limits near the intersection of Highway 207 and Feedville Road with Community Park to the east. The Hermiston Urban Renewal Agency — which also is the Hermiston City Council — during its meeting Monday, March 14, approved a resolution directing staff to prepare a plan for a new urban renewal district along Feedville Road.

The move came after presentation from MonteVista Homes. Luke Pickerill, MonteVista Homes owner, said this is a major step for the city.

"At full buildout, we will have 1,300 housing units, which represents about 15% of the total population in today's numbers of the city of Hermiston," he said.

He described The Hayfields as a "master planned community," which means that it is "designed to offer the very best in home life, from the design of open spaces and the architectural fit within the city to environmentally-friendly technology and sophisticated amenities."

These are "not like old neighborhoods where houses popped up here and there with less or no regard for the overall community design,"

his presentation slide stated. Instead, the MPC provides amenities such as parks and gathering spaces for the enjoyment of the neighborhood and the city.

Pickerill gave the council some history of the area. Around 20 years ago, the land was annexed into Hermiston, he said. Plans at the time were to develop the property into a golf course community. This plan hit a snag during the Great Recession of 2008.

Nearly a decade after the recession, Pickerill said, landowners attempted to start a new housing development, but they lacked the infrastructure and available services.

"They found it wasn't possible without a public/private partnership," he said.

Between 2017 and 2021, landowners and the city of Hermiston explored several options to make the best possible use out of the site. They sought to use this land to help address Hermiston's housing supply problems,

Pickerill said. "In early 2021, I was introduced to the landowners," he said.

MonteVista and the landowners worked together to create a master plan for the community, which they would call The Hayfields.

Getting into the details of the plan, Pickerill said the housing units would consist of single family detached housing, single family workforce housing, apartment sites, a senior manufactured facility and commercial sites, he said. School and fire sites also are part of the plan, as shown on a layout Pickerill presented.

"Our community will unlock the value of this land," Pickerill said. "It will also elevate Hermiston to a new position in the region."

After his presentation and discussion, the city council voted unanimously to approve the resolution authorizing staff to begin an urban renewal planning effort and get the ball rolling on The Hayfields.

BMCC president orders 'full institutional review'

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — In the wake of negative feedback from students and with budget cuts on the horizon, Blue Mountain Community College President Mark Browning is planning a "full institutional review" of the college.

Browning made his announcement in a March 2 president's report to the BMCC Board of Education.

"We need to hear from those who we strive to serve that in some ways, we are not meeting our own standards, we are not delivering on our promise to be Students First," he wrote. "This is a stark wake up call. We must do better. And improvement starts with the difficult work of internal examination and review, each of us individually, as departments, as buildings, as a campus."

Since starting in the position last year, Browning said he's been speaking with students to gauge their thoughts on the college and its staff. As time went on their comments have

become more candid and have included feedback that the college doesn't always feel like a welcoming environment.

But student sentiments aren't the only reason Browning wants a review. With enrollment continuing to erode, Blue Mountain expects to make more budget cuts following two previous rounds of staff reductions.

While BMCC gets audited each year like every other public agency in the state, Browning said the review will take a wider look at the school's operations and programs and provide recommendations on how to improve them. Browning said all of these measures are taken with the idea of setting BMCC back on the path of growth.

"We can make budget adjustments so that we balance our budget, but we have to make sure we are making those adjustments such that we have resources available to be proactive and grow versus just hanging on," he said. "I'm not interested in hanging on. I'm interested in growing and being vital and thriving."

Although Browning said the college is planning on moving forward with the review, it's still in the early stages. He said the review will be conducted by a third party and he's already talking with a few potential companies about taking on the task. He doesn't yet have a timeline for when the review will begin and end, and whether it will be completed by the time the college approves a budget for the next fiscal year.

While the review comes at a tough time for the college, Browning still struck an optimistic tone about the future of BMCC.

"I don't want to paint a picture that everything is doom and gloom, because it's certainly not that," he said. "We're doing a number of really good things. We're going to be coming up here in a couple of months on a time of graduation, where students are going to be walking across the stage, getting their degree and certificate, and they're gonna have a whole new world out in front of them. So let's make sure we celebrate that for the good that we're doing, with a recognition that there's always room for improvement."



Browning

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