



February 4, 2025

Secretary Sean Duffy
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: Expediting Commercial Drone Enabling Regulation

Dear Secretary Duffy:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as United States Secretary of Transportation. The Commercial Drone Alliance (CDA) appreciates the focus on aviation innovation you expressed during your confirmation hearing, and we look forward to working with you and your team to move safe commercial unmanned aircraft system (UAS, or drone) integration forward expeditiously.

The CDA also appreciates the Trump Administration's focus on removing regulatory burdens and bureaucratic red tape that impede innovation. Indeed, this goal is incredibly important for the growth of the commercial drone industry in the United States. As a near-term action item to help restore America's global leadership in commercial drone technology, you can achieve a quick win by promptly publishing the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) draft rule to safely enable commercial drone operations beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS), and to streamline current approval processes while the rule is pending. These actions would build on President Trump's successful first term commercial drone agenda. We were pleased to hear your supportive testimony on this topic at your confirmation hearing. Continued collaboration and partnership between the FAA and commercial drone industry are crucial to enabling this nascent industry to scale nationwide.

Background: Commercial Drone Integration into the National Airspace System

Commercial drone technology has advanced greatly since President Trump's first administration. Where enabled to operate, drones can save lives, reduce costs, and enhance safety and efficiencies—fighting wildfires, responding to natural disasters, promoting public safety, inspecting critical infrastructure, enhancing precision agriculture, bringing aid to remote places, and even delivering food, medicine, and household necessities. The American

UAS industry—from manufacturers to end users—stands ready to bring the benefits of drones to the United States at scale, as is already happening around the world.

Unfortunately, because drone regulatory policy has lagged behind the pace of innovation in America, deployment of this technology has been hamstrung by a regulatory quagmire, which threatens American competitiveness with foreign allies and adversaries. This is due to an antiquated aviation regulatory environment that is ill-equipped to integrate new aircraft and keep pace with technological innovation. Current drone regulations permit flights almost exclusively limited to line of sight, meaning that drone operators must follow every drone flight with a human on the ground watching the aircraft at all times. Such burdensome restrictions severely limit the economic and safety benefits of UAS. For example, agricultural drone operators are required to seek special exceptions from generally applicable regulations that make no sense for this type of aircraft, such as a requirement for pilots to use a safety belt or harness (a drone, of course, does not have an onboard pilot who needs a safety harness). These restrictions are primarily bureaucratic and do not enhance safety. Meanwhile, due to the lack of regulatory progress, our nation has lost its global leadership role in the next generation of aviation, including to the People’s Republic of China.

Enabling the safe and secure use of UAS at scale has been a bipartisan policy priority since 2012, when Congress first directed the FAA to integrate UAS into the National Airspace System (NAS). Most recently, Congress attempted to expedite drone integration by requiring a draft rule to enable BVLOS operations in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 by September 16, 2024, but the previous Administration did not accomplish what Congress directed. This delay comes at the expense of U.S. industry and U.S. competitiveness. The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the Government Accountability Office have both criticized the FAA’s minimal progress in UAS integration and inability to promulgate Congressionally-mandated UAS regulations, describing the lack of progress as “concerning”¹ and highlighting how the FAA still lacks a comprehensive strategy to integrate drones into the NAS more than a decade after being mandated to develop one.²

As a result, the UAS industry continues to be held back by convoluted and sluggish processes for advanced drone operations.³ This status quo stifles a significant engine of economic growth and high-quality jobs: the domestic commercial drone marketplace. That

¹ Letter from Chair of House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Sam Graves (R-MO), Ranking Member Rick Larsen (D-WA), and other members of the Committee to Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Michael Whitaker, Oct. 21, 2024 (noting concern that a “failure to comply with statutory instructions may result in the delay of a final [BVLOS] rule” and stating that “[t]he DOT and the FAA must work in a safe and expeditious manner to issue this critical rulemaking.”) (found at https://transportation.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2024-10-21--bvlos_letter_to_dot_faa.pdf).

² See U.S. Gov’t Accountability Off., GAO 23-105189, *FAA Should Improve Its Approach to Integrating Drones into the National Airspace System* 14–15 (2023), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105189> (noting the FAA’s UAS planning documents include only portions of four of the seven required elements for a comprehensive strategy).

³ See *id.* at 20–26 (noting that interviewed UAS industry stakeholders felt the FAA had not clearly communicated how to obtain approval for advanced UAS operations, how the FAA internally reviewed operational requests, and that the agency lacked a standardized approval process across its multiple offices).

marketplace—which will have an extraordinary impact on our economy, boosting the domestic industrial base, supporting infrastructure, helping farmers, promoting public safety, and delivering critical goods to rural locations—is currently prohibited from progressing in a majority of beneficial use cases that call for advanced operations.

In his first term, President Trump laid the groundwork for successful domestic drone integration. President Trump created and implemented the highly successful UAS Integration Pilot Program (IPP) to enable the testing of these critical technologies in communities across the country. This program introduced America First policies which created new American jobs, strengthened public-private partnerships in the aviation industry, and promoted innovation and a flexible regulatory framework to keep pace with advancements in UAS technology. In 2020, the Trump Administration finalized the most recent enabling regulation for the commercial drone industry, allowing routine drone operations over people and at night. That same year the FAA also instituted a drone digital license plate requirement (“remote identification”) supported by industry to enhance transparency in the sky.

In spite of the best efforts of certain champions at the FAA and across the federal government over the last four years, 2020 marks the last time the government made any scalable regulatory progress to enable the domestic drone marketplace to succeed. The time is ripe for President Trump to build on the successes of his first term, and to reduce bureaucratic red tape in order to scale the use of drone technology in America.

Enabling Beyond Visual Line-of-Sight UAS Operations

As the Trump Administration recognized in its first term, some regulations are urgently needed because they enable economic activity rather than inhibit it. Based on industry recommendations, the FAA drafted a BVLOS rule designed to safely enable the American drone industry to succeed while enhancing transparency in the airspace. The BVLOS rule will reduce regulatory burden and unleash growth by giving drones a right-sized regulatory framework rather than relying on exemptions and waivers from existing regulations designed for legacy aircraft. Industry wants this done. While the congressional deadline has come and gone, the commercial drone marketplace remains riddled with burdensome regulatory roadblocks that make it impossible for companies in the United States to realize the full potential of drone technology.

In the interim, waivers and exemptions from current regulations are critical to the continued operation of commercial drones in the United States. Thousands of American businesses across the country rely on these approvals to conduct operations and business on a daily basis. While the BVLOS rulemaking is pending, the FAA must improve these current case-by-case approval processes. In particular, the FAA should eliminate red tape and streamline regulatory approval pathways to enable low-risk BVLOS operations at scale.

President Trump has the chance to fix this and enable the United States to harness all the economic and competitive benefits offered to the country by the American drone industry. To do so, the DOT and the FAA must urgently move forward with the release of the proposed rule to enable BVLOS UAS operations at scale and streamline current approval processes while the rule is pending. Time is of the essence. Publication of this rule is key to providing the regulatory certainty needed to accelerate the adoption of drones across multiple industries and strengthen domestic drone manufacturers' ability to scale and compete globally.

Thank you for considering this request. We greatly appreciate your support in enabling future economic growth and development in the commercial drone industry, and we look forward to working with you and the Trump Administration over the next four years.

Sincerely,



Lisa Ellman
Executive Director
Commercial Drone Alliance

cc:

Matthew J. Vaeth
Acting Director, Office of Management and Budget

Kevin Hassett
Assistant to the President for Economic Policy
Director of the National Economic Council

Michael Kratsios
Nominee, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy

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