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New AMA Analysis: FAA Data Reveals Complex Picture of U.S. Drone Activity

FAA drone data includes military crashes, commercial operators, some people likely flying responsibly and some flying objects that aren't even drones at all

Close examination finds the number of "near misses" appear to be in the dozens, not the hundreds, based on explicit notations in the FAA's records

MUNCIE, Ind. – The Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) today released a detailed analysis of the FAA's drone data. A close examination of the 764 records, which the agency publicly released on August 21, reveals a more complex picture of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) activity in the United States than initial headlines suggested. There are military crashes and a UFO sighting in the data. Only a fraction of the records were legitimately reported "close calls" and "near misses." Some didn't involve drones at all.

"Without a doubt, there are some records of 'near misses' that represent actual safety concerns, and more needs to be done to address those," said Dave Mathewson, executive director of AMA. "But our analysis also found that the number of 'near misses' is substantially lower than the number that was previously presented."

According to AMA's analysis, about 3.5 percent (27 out of the 764 records) were identified with explicit notations as a "near miss," "near mid-air collision" or "NMAC", an acronym that stands for Near Mid-Air Collision. The records include instances of military UAS crashes and mishaps. There are also "sightings" of public agencies and commercial operators that may be flying with or without authorization. Some of the FAA's records of "sightings" may be drones being operated responsibly pursuant to FAA guidelines, while others may not even be drones at all.

Specifically, AMA's analysis found:

- Not every sighting or report was a "close call." Many were just that – sightings. Only a small fraction was legitimately reported as "near misses" or "near mid-air collisions."

- Some of the most serious incidents in the FAA data – including all actual crashes – involve government-authorized military drones, not civilian drones.

- It's not just uninformed consumers causing problems; the data includes several reports of authorized or unauthorized public entities and commercial operators flying.

- Some sightings appear to involve people flying responsibly and within the FAA's current recreational guidelines.

- Many things in the air – from balloons and birds to model rockets and mini blimps – are mistaken for, or reported as, drone sightings even when they are not.

- A number of sightings have occurred over or around stadium events, wildfires, power plants and other critical infrastructure. These raise different concerns from pilot sightings.

- In almost 20 percent (142) of the reports, local law enforcement either wasn't notified or it was unknown whether local law enforcement was notified.

"AMA has worked closely with the FAA for many years, and we continue to consider the agency a partner in promoting model aircraft and consumer drone safety," added Mathewson. "We believe the FAA's drone data could help guide policy conversations about drones and help all stakeholders identify solutions to mitigate true safety risks. But this is only possible if we take the time to analyze and accurately characterize the data."

AMA represents more than 180,000 people who fly model aircraft for recreation and educational purposes. For nearly 80 years, the organization has been developing safety guidelines and training programs, which are constantly evolving to accommodate new technologies and new modeling disciplines. In 2014, AMA launched the "Know Before You Fly" campaign with the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI) and the FAA to educate newcomers to unmanned aircraft technology about where they should and shouldn't fly.

The AMA analysis also contains two sets of recommendations for the FAA going forward – one set of recommendations relating to the FAA's handling of its drone data, and another set of recommendations to ensure the continued safety of the U.S. airspace.

AMA's complete analysis of the FAA data can found here:
http://www.modelaircraft.org/gov/docs/AMAAnalysis-Closer-Look-at-FAA-Drone-Data_091415.pdf.

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The Academy of Model Aeronautics, founded in 1936, continues to be devoted to national airspace safety. It serves as the nation's collective voice for approximately 180,000 modelers in 2,400 clubs in the United States and Puerto Rico. Headquartered in Muncie, Indiana, AMA is a membership organization representing those who fly model aircraft for recreation and educational purposes. For more information, visit www.modelaircraft.org.