



(Photo by Alex Brandon, AP)

NFL Films to kick off drones flying over stadiums on non-game days

Are you ready for more aerial video of some football?

The National Football League became the first major sports organization to receive approval from the Federal Aviation Administration to fly drones over its stadiums. Just not during games.

The league's NFL Films plans to use DJI Phantom and Inspire drones, which weigh only 3 to 6 pounds including cameras, to record on closed sets around stadiums on non-game days.

NFL Films didn't detail what it plans to shoot with the drones in its May and August applications. But while not covering games on the gridiron, the drones will fly closer than blimps and more freely than cameras tethered to wires above the field.

Steve Marks, an aviation lawyer in Miami with Podhurst Orseck, said the NFL could popularize the use of drones for promotion and advertising everything from lotion to NASCAR. But if filming over crowds of players and spectators, drones remain risky for crashing after suffering a mechanical defect or losing the link to the remote pilot, he said.

"It highlights that this is going to be a growing area and it's going to require a great deal of thought and regulation," Marks said. "Right now, it's the wild, wild west of the skies."

The FAA approval Sept. 17 carries the customary restrictions for flights only during the day, up to 400 feet in the air, and within sight of the remote pilot or another observer in verbal contact with the operator. The drones must also stay at least 200 feet away from people not associated with the flights.

The approval is among 1,658 the FAA has granted since July 2014. The agency is granting exemptions while developing comprehensive rules for commercial drones weighing up to 55 pounds, with final regulations expected in late 2016.

The FAA typically bans drones around sporting events, to reduce the risk of a wayward drone crashing into the crowd. For example, drones are prohibited around events this week where Pope Francis is appearing in Washington, D.C., New York and Philadelphia.

But like NFL Films, the first exemptions the FAA granted were for movie-makers on closed sets because those conditions are considered safest for operators and regulators to learn more about how to fly safely.

NFL Films traditionally documented games with the crisper images of film that television couldn't match in past decades. The drama would be heightened with martial orchestration and the stentorian narration of the late John Facenda.