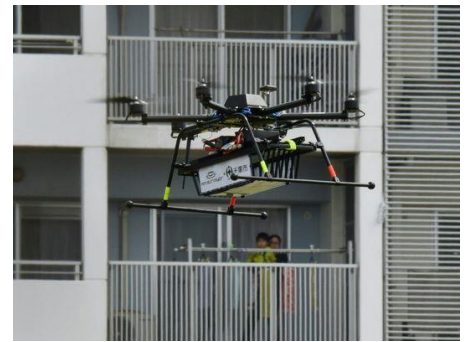


British Air drone collision sounds alarm for new regulations



Bart Jansen, USA TODAY

A British Airways plane's collision with a drone while landing at Heathrow Airport has renewed calls for stricter regulation in the U.S., where more than 150 airliners reported close sightings of drones in the last 18 months, including eight in the last two weeks of January.



"This is a real issue," Steve Marks, an aviation lawyer in Miami. "This is a warning for the flying public, airlines and operators that this can't be ignored any longer."

The Air Line Pilots Association seeks stricter regulation of drones and their operators to avoid such collisions, which could disable an aircraft if the metal frame and battery of a drone come in contact with an airliner's engine. The result would be similar to a bird strike, such as the geese that knocked out the engines of the US Airways flight which forced it to land on the Hudson River in 2009.

"There is a reasonable, remote risk of a plane going down," Marks said. "It would be irresponsible to ignore that danger."

Federal Aviation Administration logged 1,348 reports of drone sightings from Nov. 13, 2014 through Jan. 31, 2016, the latest month available. Many of the incidents involved general-aviation aircraft rather than commercial airliners, but a USA TODAY analysis of the FAA data shows that at least 153 of the drone-related sightings and incidents, or 11%, involved airliners or large cargo planes such as those operated by UPS.

In a two-week period in January, the pilots of eight commercial airliners reported drone sightings, including one in Miami that came within 100 feet of the plane. The pilot of an Airbus 319 en route from Ecuador on Jan. 30 spotted a white, quad-copter drone about 100 feet above the jet as it approached Miami's airport an altitude of 1,700 feet.

The same day, an ExpressJet Airlines flight at 19,500 feet, traveling about 50 miles south of Atlanta, reported a drone 300 feet below and to the left of the airliner.

In one instance involving a SkyWest flight approaching Tucson airport at 3,700 feet in the air on Jan. 18, a orange drone passing within 100 yards of the plane was so large controllers in the airport's tower could see it with binoculars.

Other sightings during that period included a Canadair flight in Burbank, Calif., and JetBlue flight at New York's John F. Kennedy airport.

The United Kingdom's Air Accidents Investigations Branch will investigate the Sunday incident to confirm the pilot's report of a drone collision, but the Airbus A320 landed safely and was cleared for another flight after an inspection.

The Federal Aviation Administration in the USA created a national registry for drone owners so that investigators could track down an operator after a crash. The registry, begun Dec. 21, has 400,000 names – more than the number of registrations for regular planes. The agency also regulates how and where drones can fly. The FAA expects to finalize rules for commercial drones weighing up to 55 pounds by June.

Those rules won't apply worldwide. To get broader regulations in place, the International Civil Aviation Organization, a branch of the United Nations, must set policies, Marks said.

Jim Williams, the former manager of FAA's office overseeing the integration of drones into the national airspace and now a principal handling aviation issues at Dentons law firm, noted federal and state lawmakers have already approved drone regulations, and drone companies are seeking technology solutions, such as radio signals, to better track and control the craft. Some manufacturers have programmed "fences" in the skies to prevent drones from flying too close to airports or other restricted areas.

"There's no real panacea for this," Williams said. "It's got to be education, penalties for people who screw up and fly too close, but it also has to be a mechanism to catch the people."

Hobbyists contend reports of drone sightings can be vague, may be mistaken and often pose no danger. A study by the Academy of Model Aeronautics, which represents 180,000 recreational operators, found that the first 764 incident reports included just 27 that pilots described as a "near miss."

None of the sightings involved a collision and pilots reported taking evasive action 10 times amid the hundreds of reports, according to the group.

Dave Mathewson, the group's executive director, said the organization supports safety guidelines.

"If the investigation reveals someone was flying in a careless and reckless manner, we support him or her being held accountable to the fullest extent of the law," he said.