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Sep. 12, 2017



“Hurricane Harvey is the first major catastrophe in which drones have been used on a large scale by both government and commercial operators,” according to Ken Long, an analyst at the Freedonia Group. They are also likely to find widespread use if Hurricane Irma either directly strikes or skirts the east coast of Florida early next week, as current projections show.

In addition to helping keep emergency workers safe by allowing them to look for people trapped by floodwaters and inspect damage in high-risk areas, drone use can speed up the recovery process. Drones can be flown over structures such as fuel

tanks, power lines, and railroad tracks before they can be reached by land, enabling

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Houston and nearby areas to help protect first responders in helicopters and other manned aircraft. This flight ban included all drone operations except those specifically approved by the FAA.

In the 10 days that followed Hurricane Harvey, the FAA issued more than 100 separate authorizations for drone use in the Houston area, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#). Some of the applications for drone use were reviewed and approved by the FAA within hours, an unusually fast turnaround time for an agency that typically takes days or weeks to make decisions.

With the exception of a handful of flights conducted by media firms, all of the approved operations were for drones used in conjunction with, or on behalf of, government agencies. Drones were used to inspect bridges, roadways, and power lines; assess the condition of oil refineries and water plants; and survey coastal damage.

As the flood waters continued to recede and flight restrictions were eased or lifted, a number of insurance companies – including Allstate, Farmers Insurance, Travelers, and USAA – began to use drones to assess property damage and speed claims processing.

However, drone use by insurance companies and other commercial users is currently limited by FAA rules that do not allow them to be flown above 400 feet, outside the visual line of sight of the operator, or above people not directly involved in their operation, unless a waiver is granted.

These regulations could change with a 2018 FAA reauthorization bill being considered by Congress. “The demonstrated usefulness of drones in Hurricane Harvey response and recovery efforts could well influence the content of that legislation,” says Long.

Even if the current FAA regulations remain in place, US commercial drone demand

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