

For farmers, small drones could help generate bigger profits

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.24.15

Word Count **715**



A hexacopter drone flies during a demonstration at a farm and winery in Cordova, Maryland. Many farmers want to use unmanned aircraft to monitor their agricultural operations. Photo: AP Photo/Alex Brandon

CORDOVA, Md. — Missouri farmer Mike Geske wants a drone.

The small plane might look like a toy, but for Geske, the high-tech machine is serious business.

Geske has traveled to Maryland to see drones in action and learn more about how farmers can put them to work.

He wants to buy a drone to monitor his farm's irrigation pipes. Right now, he is paying three men to do the job, but if he switched to a drone, he wouldn't even have to pay for a pilot. Geske says the money he would save on labor and fuel would be amazing.

Nearby, Maryland farmer Chip Bowling tries flying one of the drones. Bowling is president of the National Corn Growers Association. He pictures using a drone to help him keep an eye on which of his fields need extra spraying for bugs.

Bobby Hutchison is interested in using drones on his farm, but he doesn't want to buy one himself. Hutchinson pays a man to walk through his fields and tell him how his crops are doing. He hopes that worker will buy a drone to speed up the process and help him collect better information about the problems he sees.

Drones Could Save Farmers Money

Farmers are eager to start using drone technology. "I see it very similar to how I saw the computer when it first started," says Hutchison, 64. "It was a no-brainer."

The small vehicles are relatively inexpensive and could save farmers money by replacing some human workers. Drones can gather information about crops and send updates to sprayers and other farm equipment. They can tell farm machines where to find problem spots. That way, farmers don't waste extra water and chemicals on areas that don't really need them.

Farmers might become some of drone makers' biggest customers. Experts estimate that 8 of every 10 drones sold to businesses will soon have something to do with agriculture.

For years, farmers couldn't take advantage of drones because the government had not created rules for how to use them. But now, farm drones are finally starting to take off. Since January, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has given more than 50 agricultural projects permission to try drones. The FAA is the government agency in charge of keeping the nation's skies safe.

Business Is Booming For Drone Companies

Companies that put farm drones to work say business is booming. Quick improvements in drone technology have helped them grow.

Bret Chilcott runs a drone company in Kansas called AgEagle. The company launched just last year and became popular very quickly. Now AgEagle has a list of several hundred people waiting for its products.

Chilcott says drone technology changed a lot in just that short period of time.

"Last year, users had to land their aircraft and then take the data to the computer," he says. "Now the data appears on your iPad or hand-held device a few minutes after flight."

Drone data could be anything from 3-D images of plants to animal temperatures. Information like that used to take days to collect — or might not have been collected at all. Now it can be gathered in minutes or hours from overhead. In some cases, it can even be combined with information collected by other high-tech farm machinery.

Safety Concerns Still Exist

For now, most farmers are still not allowed to operate drones.

The FAA is working on new safety rules for drones. It also plans new privacy rules so people won't use drones to spy on their neighbors. Earlier this year, the FAA put together a plan that would allow farmers to fly drones that weigh less than 55 pounds. Farmers would have to pass a pilot's test and a background check. They would also need to keep their drones within sight and could only fly them during the daytime.

Some people have concerns about the new plan. Pilots of crop dusters and other planes that operate around farms worry that the rules do not go far enough to keep everyone safe.

"We can't see them," says Andrew Moore of the National Agricultural Aviation Association. Moore's group wants the FAA to require drones to have lights that would help airplanes figure out where they are. They also want drones to come with tracking systems.

Quiz

- 1 Fill in the blank.
In the article, farmers are portrayed as
 - (A) worried about new technology
 - (B) interested in taking care of their workers
 - (C) excited about saving money by using drones
 - (D) angry at the government for delaying the use of drones

- 2 According to the article, people are worried about drones for all the following reasons EXCEPT:
 - (A) They may cost jobs.
 - (B) They may cause privacy concerns.
 - (C) Pilots may crash into them because they can't see them.
 - (D) They might not come with a system to track them.

- 3 In the section "Drones Could Save Farmers Money" which paragraph presents specific examples of cost savings from drones?

- 4 Which section from the article includes an argument that opposes the main idea?
 - (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-6]
 - (B) "Drones Could Save Farmers Money"
 - (C) "Business Is Booming For Drone Companies"
 - (D) "Safety Concerns Still Exist"