

Southwestern Drone Conference Trip Report

The tone of the conference was centered on UAVs in use for news and entertainment. Specifically, their interests were mainly First Amendment rights and privacy. The conference was held in a single room at the Southwestern Law School campus in LA. UC Merced was given the only display table at the conference, where the Aquacopter with transport case and GCS, Transmitter case, quad-fold, FAA sUAS Roadmap, AggieAir UC Merced COA, and COA packet were displayed. UC Merced magazines, MESA Lab whitesheets and Dr. Chen business cards were displayed and handed out for the duration of the conference. The entire conference was filmed, and video for the conference is going to be uploaded sometime over the next week.

The first speaker was Tom Hallman, who is the president and founder of Pictorvision. Pictorvision is a supplier of stabilized cameras that are used for news and entertainment. Their systems include both ground and aerial based systems, most of which are large scale. His presentation overviewed the current state of hobbyist UAV technology and corporate thoughts on UAV technology for the future of entertainment. He emphasized on how corporations who will utilize UAVs commercially are more likely to call off a dangerous flight than the hobbyist-gone-commercial. The reasoning behind this thought is due to the necessity for the smaller outfit to commit to a job for financial reasons, whereas from a larger corporation liability is weighed out thoroughly for every flight. He also spoke about the dangers that currently face manned aircraft in news and entertainment, and how utilizing UAVs can and will reduce injury and death in this industry.

The first panel was on the First Amendment and UAVs. The speakers were Donna Dulo (Senior Systems Engineer, U.S. Dept of Defence), Stephen Morrison (Assistant Professor, University of North Dakota School of Law), Caren Morrison (Assistant Professor, Georgia State University of Law), and Mickey Osterreicher (General Counsel, National Press Photographers Association). During this panel, privacy and amendment rights were discussed, and how UAVs have the ability to infringe upon these rights. This panel honed in on potential issues regarding privacy and the use of UAVs by paparazzi's, news reporting and journalism. The 6 FAA UAV test sites were discussed, specifically the UND site that is focused on human factors research.

The second panel was on FAA regulations of RPAs. Speakers Timothy Ravish (President, Ravich Law Firm), Ted Wierzbanski and Paul McDuffee (Insitu, Inc and Co-Chair of Special Committee SC-228). This panel's tone was from an industry perspective and one that touched upon UAV integration in general. Paul McDuffee spoke on current society perspectives of UAVs as drones, and how we need to change that idea. They spoke about standardization, and how the first international standardization was the rail system. Some form of standardization must occur for UAS to be integrated into the inter-NAS. Need to harmonize the world with UAS.

The following segments touched upon: Insurance, frequency spectrum allocation, responsibility/liability, and certification/airworthiness. The first segment, insurance, had two insurance experts on the panel. Vikki Stone (Senior Vice President, Poms and Associates) and Gale A. Townsley (Senior Counsel, Severson & Werson) who discussed who would be most likely to begin insuring UAS in the future due to its “risky” insurability. Currently, Poms and Associates are beginning the first steps towards insuring UAS, however most of their insurability questions are based upon the current manned aircraft questions. Charles Naftalin (Partner, Holland & Knight) spoke during the second segment, frequency spectrum allocation. He made it clear that the FCC, not the FAA, claims ownership to the airwaves in the US. The FCC is critical in the integration of UAS into the NAS, in order to prevent any interference of UAS with other electronics that work on similar frequencies. The third segment, responsibility/liability, had three partners of McKenna Long & Aldrich speak. Mark Dombroff spoke from his years of experience with defending and litigating for manned aviation. He emphasized that the FAA does not care that the aircrafts are unmanned or that they have the ability to take pictures, but instead are focused on how to safely integrate them into the NAS. He is very hopeful regarding the timelines given by the FAA, stating that this will be similar to how previous aircrafts were introduced. Stephen Nichols and Mike Rizzo spoke on liabilities and contracting. They advised, in order to effectively spread liability, one needs to list all possible scenarios and allocate those liabilities to manufacturer, operator, and contractor. Joe Vacek (Assistant Prof, John D. Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences, University of North Dakota) briefly discussed airworthiness and certification, speaking on how it is not well defined just yet.

The final panel, “Legislative Activities at the Local, State, Federal and International Levels”, gave an idea of how different states and countries view the use of UAVs by civilians. Shayna Gersher (Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada) spoke on Canada’s current integration of UAVs. Currently, in Canada one can run commercial operations utilizing UAVs. Hilary B. Farber (Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts School of Law) discussed which states have created laws on the use of UAVs in their airspace.

The conference concluded at 5 PM, and was followed by a reception.

