



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 6, 2012

Public Outcry Halts Calif. Sheriff's Plan to Purchase Drone

The Alameda County, California, sheriff's office has been forced to [suspend](#) the purchase of a surveillance drone after constitutionalists and activists slammed the agency with concerns that the use of the unmanned aerial vehicle would violate privacy protections.

Sheriff Gregory Ahern had asked the Alameda County Board of Supervisors to approve a \$31,646 grant to purchase a drone. The money was part of a \$1.2-million grant handed out by the California Emergency Management Agency.



County supervisors were preparing to vote on the use of grant money for such a purchase, but the public outcry from civil rights attorneys and anti-drone advocates has now forced the sheriff's office to postpone the decision.

Mercury News reports:

Last minute intervention Tuesday morning by the American Civil Liberties Union prompted supervisors to require explicit authorization to use grant money the Sheriff's Office received to purchase the drone. Now the proposal will have to go to the public protection committee for approval then back to the full board of supervisors.

Undersheriff Richard Lucia has announced that the office will not buy a drone until the subject has been fully explored publicly. If the acquisition of the aircraft is blocked by supervisors, he said, the money will be returned to the California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA) to be used for something else.

"We stand by our word," he said.

ACLU attorney Linda Lye stated that the proposal would allow virtual police "spying," adding that Sheriff Ahern was "not taking privacy issues seriously."

Members of the Electronic Frontier Foundation helped orchestrate opposition to the plan.

According to those opposed to the drone, the sheriff's office had misled the public into believing that they were much further from acquisition than they actually were.

Likewise, the law enforcement agency has reportedly downplayed concerns over privacy protections, asserting that the drone would be used to help in search and rescue missions. However, a July 20 internal sheriff's department memo revealed otherwise. *Mercury News* writes that the memo "shows the department identified uses other than search and rescue, including barricaded suspects, investigative and tactical surveillance, intelligence gathering, suspicious persons and large crowd control disturbances."

Trevor Timm of the Electronic Frontier Foundation notes, "We're not against drones entirely," but adds that the possibility exists for the unmanned aerial vehicles to be used in "mission creep."



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“We want to make sure the public gets a say,” asserts Timm.

Approximately a dozen U.S. law enforcement agencies have already used or are using drones, including the Seattle Police Department.

The use of aerial spy technology in the United States has been a controversial subject for privacy advocates.

The Environmental Protection Agency reportedly has been using aircraft to [spy](#) on cattle ranchers in Iowa and Nebraska. Nebraska’s congressional delegation recently [submitted](#) a joint letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson expressing concerns about the surveillance, to which the EPA replied that its use of the planes is well within the legal boundaries, as well as “[cost-effective.](#)”

The practice prompted members of Nebraska’s congressional delegation to raise objections in a letter to the EPA regarding the potential for privacy violations.

Still, Congress has already approved the deployment of approximately 30,000 drones in U.S. skies by the year 2020, prompting privacy advocates to question how the FAA will safeguard the American people from the aircraft.

Earlier this year, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told a House Committee on Homeland Security that her agency was “looking at drones that could be utilized to give us situational awareness in a large public safety [matter] or disaster.” By October, the DHS announced that it would begin testing “Robotic Aircraft for Public Safety” at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

A solicitation posted on the Federal Business Opportunities website confirmed that the drones are set to be used for applications such as “law enforcement operations, search and rescue, and fire and hazardous material spill response.”

In an appearance on the panel portion of Fox News’ *Special Report* earlier this year, syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer actually took a hard stance [against](#) the use of drones in the United States:

A drone is a high-tech version of an old army and a musket. It ought to be used in Somalia to hunt bad guys but not in America. I don’t want to see it hovering over anybody’s home. Yes, you can say we have satellites, we’ve got Google Street View and London has a camera on every street corner but that’s not an excuse to cave in on everything else and accept a society where you’re always under — being watched by the government. This is not what we want.

Concerns that the drones would add to privacy violations were vindicated when a newly discovered Air Force intelligence brief revealed that surveillance data of American citizens captured by drones “accidentally” may be stored and analyzed by the Pentagon. “Collected imagery may incidentally include US persons or private property without consent,” the instruction states.

Critics have voiced concerns that the FAA has not developed proper privacy guidelines for the use of drones. And without federal guidelines for how the data from drones is collected and used, some fear that there will be constitutional violations.

“We should not be rushing headlong into buying a drone without guidelines,” Lye said.

According to documents [obtained](#) by the Center for Investigative Reporting, the FAA has approved the use of an alarming number of surveillance drones in U.S. skies, even as the FAA’s own drone tests have resulted in numerous crashes, including in airspace where no other aircraft was flying.



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Aware of the increasing controversy over the unmanned vehicles, the drone industry in the United States has done its best to project a positive image to the public.

Michael Toscano, president of the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, is optimistic that some astute public relations will help his industry.

“You have to keep repeating the good words,” he commented, adding that the word “drones” should also be dispensed with because of its negative connotations and replaced with the term “remotely piloted vehicles.”

Photo of a drone: AP Images



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