



My Turn

The sky's the limit

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Both New Mexico Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall voted for two new laws that could detrimentally affect the quality of our lives — the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the FAA Air Transportation Modernization and Safety Reform Act of 2012 (“the FAA Act”). Congressman Ben Lujan wisely and courageously voted against them. If it weren't for the diligence of Not1MoreAcre!

(N1MA!) we might be blindsided by what's facing us by the passage of these laws. A nonprofit watchdog organization, Not1MoreAcre! acts to prevent the expansion of the U.S. military into generational family ranches and endangered grasslands in southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico. In its requested Comments to the FAA, Not1MoreAcre! clarifies what to expect: Smuggled into the above laws are provisions for drones to invade not only our beautiful skies and peace and quiet in southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico, but shockingly, our entire national airspace. Section 332 (a) (1) of the FAA Act directs the Secretary of Transportation to “develop a comprehensive plan to safely accelerate the integration of civil unmanned aircraft systems [drones] into the national airspace system.”

Similarly, Section 1097 (a) of the NDAA Act requires the FAA Administrator to “establish a program to integrate unmanned aircraft systems [drones] into the national airspace system at six test ranges.”

The new laws are not saying that private companies (read military contractors) will be assigned special areas in which to fly their drones, but that as soon as possible, they will be flying their drones in the national airspace system where both commercial and private aircraft now fly. In other words, for drones, the sky's the limit!

According to *The Washington Times*, “30,000 drones could be in the nation's skies by 2020.” As Not1MoreAcre! observes, drones can be anywhere from the size of an insect to an aircraft 240 feet long and weighing more than 40,000 lbs. In May 2010 the Department of Defense reported that all drones “surpassed 1 million annual flight hours,” and there are “more than 50 defense contractors ... currently developing more than 155 designs” of drones. Consider the hundreds of millions of dollars involved.

Some potential impacts Not1MoreAcre! urges the FAA to examine include “delays of the take-offs and landings of commercial and private aircraft, impacts on human resources needed for air traffic control and potential aircraft crashes.” What an air traffic controller's nightmare!

Quoting *The Los Angeles Times*, Not1MoreAcre! reports that “thirty-eight Predator and Reaper drones have crashed during combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and nine more during training on bases in the U.S. — with each crash costing between \$3.7 and \$5 million ... the Air Force says there have been 79 drone accidents costing at least \$1 million each.”

Not1MoreAcre! recommends that the experienced FAA, and not some other agency like the CIA or NASA or the DOD, should be responsible for “establishing and enforcing safety standards related to unmanned drone operation and controlling all air traffic in time, altitude, and geography to reduce the risk of midair collisions.”

But before any drones take to our national skies, Not1MoreAcre! insists the FAA should conduct a NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) review of the effect unmanned drones will have on the environment, that is, to subject drones to an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA). As Not1MoreAcre! reminds us, the purpose of NEPA is to “ensure public disclosure and transparency [so that] the public ... is reasonably informed about the potential impacts of different courses of action,” including not proceeding with action.

When asked about the status of the Environmental Assessment, Cannon AFB has been preparing on its proposed Low Altitude Tactical Navigation (LATN) training of the manned CV-22 Osprey and C-130 Hercules over Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, its Public Affairs officer replied, “I don’t know. We’re waiting to hear.”

With both Predator and Reaper drones that are weaponized based at Cannon, the base has changed its purpose.

It is not the policy of Cannon to release the number of aircraft on base, including, of course, the number of drones.

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