Savannah River Site
Citizens Advisory Board

Recommendation 346
Drone Spotting Over SRS

Background:

The Savannah River Site (SRS), a 310 square mile (198,046 acres) Department of Energy site, is located in the sand-hills region of South Carolina. It encompasses parts of Aiken, Barnwell and Allendale counties and is bordered on the west by the Savannah River and Georgia. SRS is close to several cities, including Augusta, Georgia and Columbia, South Carolina. It is also within a few hours of Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Greenville and Charlotte.[i]

The Savannah River Site is home to over fifty-years of innovation, design, and storage of materials that spawned from the Cold War Era. Included at the site are canyons that down blend uranium and plutonium, over 10,000 bundles of used-nuclear fuel, and 150,000 gallons of traunsuranic waste stored in tank farms. Additionally, the site is home to labs and research center that contribute information used around the globe.

During the summer of 2016, eight drones were spotted flying over the Savannah River Site. According to releases from the Department of Energy (DOE), several reports of UAS (Unmanned Aerial System) flying over K-Area, H-Area, E-Area and MOX were made. At the time, airspace over the site was unrestricted, although the devices did pose a safety and security concern.

At this time, the operator(s) of the spotted drone(s) have yet to identified. The Federal Aviation Admission maintains a website dedicated to understanding rules and regulations surrounding drone usage and registration, including weight regulations and operator presence near the drone.

While the debate on drone usage continues to play out in the business world, media and court, safety concerns do exist for flying drones over SRS. Drivers of cars who work on site are required to possess a license and insurance, providing a level of safety and accountability. However, drone operators are not required to have insurance. If a car accident occurs on site, the car has a VIN, a license and operator that can be located. If a drone falls from the sky and causes injury, it could be near impossible for the operator to be located. When people enter the site and perform work, they have an expectation of a safe work environment. With drones flying overhead by operators who credentials and training are unknown, a risk occurs for drone related injuries.

More so, a private citizen is unable to walk onto the site and take photographs of buildings and structures. When a drone operator flies over the site, they bypass identification and security checks and are able to freely roam around the site. If a person is unable to move freely in a restricted area, then a drone should follow suit. At this time, the drone activities are unknown.

In recent news, the Trump administration is looking to Congress to allow the federal government to "track, hack and destroy any time of drone over domestic soil" with exceptions to laws that already govern surveillance, computer privacy and aircraft protection, according to a New York Times article.

While looking for a balance between civil liberty and safety, the government has voiced ongoing concern about small drone proliferation, including one that crashed over the White House fence in 2015. There are also growing concerns that as technology grows, drones will have the potential to carry objects, and the potential for terrorists to use them to deploy weapons onto secure areas is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Recommendation:

Given the nature of sensitive material housed at the site and public concern over the reported spotting of UAS, the Savannah River Site Citizens Advisory Board recommends that the Department of Energy:

1. Continue investigating the drone sighting as allowed within its own agency regulations.
2. Continue to work with needed authorities to understand and implement the best use of air space over the site, to protect site activities and workers.
3. To provide updates to the SRS CAB about findings related to the UAS.
4. *Consider partnering with sister agencies to utilize site resources for drone testing.*

Recommendation #346
Adopted July 25, 2017
Sponsored by the Strategic & Legacy Management Committee

[i] http://www.srs.gov/general/about/where1.htm