FAA Seeks Applicants for Center of Excellence

In mid-August, the Federal Aviation Administration released its final solicitation seeking applicants for the Center of Excellence for Unmanned Aircraft Systems, which will work on issues such as detect and avoid, control and communications, low-altitude operations, compatibility with air traffic control, and training and certification for UAS pilots and crew.

The deadline for team proposals was 22 Sept. and the center is due to be selected within the next year. Upon selection, the center will receive $500,000 in funding per year for the next 10 years, as a minimum, from the agency. If selected, the university will be required to match that dollar amount.

"The FAA will initially issue cooperative agreements to the selected university team members and specific projects will be defined and funded through matching grants over the life of the COE," the FAA said in a statement accompanying the solicitation.

Final FAA Test Site Cleared for Operation

And then there were six — the final Federal Aviation Administration-selected UAS test site location was deemed fully operational on 13 Aug. at an event at Virginia Tech, which featured Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe and FAA Administrator Michael Huerta.

The event also included a flying demonstration, where a Virginia Tech-modified small DJI Flamewheel F550 UAS surveyed two crash scenes — one with a truck carrying mock hazardous material and one of a mock motorcycle accident.

Unmanned aircraft "are going to be used in countless industries all across the commonwealth, the country and the globe," McAuliffe said. "They will of course improve productivity, support advanced rescue operations and revolutionize the way that we do business, and I'm just glad that the kickoff is right here in the commonwealth of Virginia."

FAA Administrator Michael Huerta meets the press at the Mid-Atlantic test site event as Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe looks on. AUVSI photo.

The test site is the Mid-Atlantic Aviation Partnership and includes airspace in Virginia, New Jersey and Maryland. The FAA granted the site seven certificates of authorization over two years for a variety of vehicles, including rotorcraft like the DJI and fixed-wing vehicles.

Coast Guard, NOAA Test Puma in Arctic Exercise

The Coast Guard's Research and Development Center teamed this summer with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, launching an AeroVironment Puma from the Coast Guard cutter Healy as a part of an exercise to determine the system's ability in the extreme cold.

It's called the Oil in Ice Project, and while buoys and submersibles collected data from the water, the Puma did its part flying over the Arctic Ocean.

"UAS technology is already used by NOAA for gathering data and collecting imagery, but this system has rarely been tested in the Arctic," says Todd Jacobs, a NOAA project scientist in NOAA's UAS program. "In 2013, we launched a Puma AE from the Healy and tested its flight endurance in cold weather. This year, we developed procedures for landing the system directly onto the flight deck, something that had never before been done on a Coast Guard vessel."

"The Arctic is a cold, dangerous place, and there's always some risk any time a small-boat crew gets underway," says Bill Jankowski, an RDC program lead traveling aboard the Healy. "Having the ability to land a UAS aboard a vessel rather than in the water is important, because it means crew members don't have to be put at unnecessary danger by going out to retrieve it."

John Ferguson and Chris Tompson of Aerovironment release a Puma AE from the Coast Guard Cutter Healy. Photo courtesy Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Eggert/U.S. Coast Guard.

In addition to the new landings, operators used the Puma's infrared and electro-optical camera to look at video of a simulated oil spill and relay that information to NOAA's Emergency Response Management Application database.