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Department of Public Safety launches new drone program

By Allie Morris, Austin Bureau Updated 4:08 pm, Thursday, February 15, 2018



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Two of the U.S. Army's most-used unmanned aerial vehicles, or "drones," will soon have their own exclusive airport near the Texas-Mexico border. Scroll through to see how drones — and the debate surrounding their use — have evolved through the years.

AUSTIN — The Texas Department of Public Safety is launching a new drone program, roughly

eight years after scrapping its first effort due to challenges posed by federal restrictions and maintenance costs, according to an agency news release issued Thursday.

Over the last few months, the department has quietly spent roughly \$70,000 to purchase 17 drones. The most expensive, an Aeryon SkyRanger equipped with a high-tech camera, cost \$48,000 and can fly for up to 50 minutes, according to department purchase records.

“The (drone) is an excellent tool to deploy when DPS aircraft are unavailable; if a mission is too dangerous for manned aircraft to be deployed; or when deemed more cost effective than conventional aircraft,” said the news release.

Known formally as unmanned aerial systems, the new drones will aid in search and rescue, disaster support, aerial observation and crime scene photography, among other uses, according to DPS. The SkyRanger, equipped with specialized software and an extended battery life, will mostly be used by highway patrol for crash scene reconstruction, DPS spokesman Tom Vinger said.

So far, three agency officials have passed the 10-hour training needed to fly the drones, which can only be operated during daylight hours.

The department’s 18-page policy guide says that division directors will “establish protocols to prevent violations of policy, law, and public privacy,” but those aren’t detailed in the document.

The drones add to a growing fleet of DPS aircraft that already include 15 helicopters and nine planes. The Express-News **reported last year** that two high-altitude surveillance planes DPS bought recently for more than \$15 million to help secure the Mexican border regularly circle over San Antonio. Details about their missions are scarce.

It’s not clear why DPS is adopting drones now; the agency didn’t immediately respond to questions.

When asked recently why the department uses planes over drones, a spokesman said “their missions and capabilities are not comparable. There are also numerous limitations placed on

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles by the (Federal Aviation Administration).”

DPS first deployed drones in 2008, one of the first state and local law enforcement agencies to use the devices. Within two years, however, the department scrapped the program over concern with “complicated Federal Aviation Administration restrictions, battery life of the device, maintenance costs and deficient video quality,” according to the agency.

This story will be updated

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