Memorandum

U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of the Secretary of Transportation
Office of Inspector General

Subject: INFORMATION: Audit Announcement – FAA's Oversight of Unmanned Aircraft Systems Project No. 12A3006A000

Date: October 22, 2012

From: Jeffrey B. Guzzetti
Assistant Inspector General
for Aviation and Special Program Audits

Reply to Attn. of: JA-10

To: Director, Audit and Evaluation

Recent interest in the domestic use of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)[1] for research, law enforcement, private sector, and State government needs has resulted in over 150 new unmanned aircraft designs. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) predicts there will be roughly 10,000 active UAS in the United States in 5 years, with over $89 billion in worldwide UAS spending over the next 10 years. However, FAA has approved these operations only on a limited, case-by-case basis, due in part to the safety risks associated with UAS integration into the National Airspace System (NAS). While the capabilities of unmanned aircraft have significantly improved, they have a limited ability to detect, sense, and avoid other air traffic.

Given the growing interest and potential safety issues associated with UAS flights, Congress recently directed the Secretary of Transportation, in the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (Act),[2] to develop a comprehensive plan for integrating UAS into the NAS no later than September 30, 2015. In addition, the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Senate Commerce Committee and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and the Chairmen and Ranking Members of their Aviation Subcommittees, requested that we assess FAA's progress in these efforts. Accordingly, our audit objectives are to assess: (1) FAA's efforts to mitigate safety risks for integrating UAS into the NAS, and (2) FAA's progress and challenges in meeting the UAS requirements cited in the Act.

[1] An Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) is comprised of a pilotless aircraft, satellite or radio link, and ground control station where an operator controls the movements of the aircraft. UAS aircraft range in size from those with a wingspan as large as a Boeing 737 to smaller than a radio-controlled model airplane. UAS can serve diverse purposes, such as conducting military operations, enhancing border security, and monitoring forest fires.

[2] FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-95, February 14, 2012.

Our audit will include visits to FAA Headquarters, the FAA offices responsible for UAS oversight, and selected public and private entities engaged in UAS activities. We plan to begin the audit the week of October 22, 2012, and will contact your audit liaison to schedule an entrance conference. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 366-0500 or Robin Koch, Program Director, at (404) 562-3770.

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cc: DOT Audit Liaison, M-1
FAA Audit Liaison, AAE-100