

Private drones landing on Legislature's 2016 to-do list

Lawmaker to seek limits on recreational drone flights

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SALEM — If you're planning to arm your hobby drone, your window is closing.

Oregon lawmakers are working to add to the state's laws on the small, unmanned aerial systems, better known as drones, that have taken to skies across the country in numbers that have left lawmakers — and pilots — scrambling to create rules that limit their use.

Rep. John Huffman, R-The Dalles, has become Salem's go-to on drones. He plans to bring a bill in the 2016 session that he hopes will address concerns about recreational pilots who fly their drones near wildfires, airports and other areas that have frightened commercial pilots and at times prevented firefighting planes from dropping water or flame retardant at crucial times.

"The (Federal Aviation Administration) has gotten roughly 100 notifications from pilots this last year — from manned aircraft — that they have viewed or witnessed drones as they've been flying," Huffman said.

The north Central Oregon Republican has for three years spearheaded a drone work group that is rounding out state rules and regulations that will govern the skies while the federal government [figures out how it will address](#) a growing demand for the small, remote-operated aircraft.

He and a wide group of civil liberties advocates, business leaders and state agency officials worked in 2012 and 2013 to limit how law enforcement agencies could use drones. [House Bill 2710](#), which passed widely in 2013, requires police to get a warrant if they're using a drone to gather information in a case, unless the agency has probable cause and believed time was a crucial factor in solving a case.

"A part of that bill was that law enforcement and government agencies could not weaponize drones," Huffman said. "In that bill we didn't address recreational or hobby drones at all."

The bill instead focused on what are called public drones, any drone used by a government entity, and required any public body that uses them to register the flier with the state Department of Aviation starting Jan. 2, 2016.

The bill also stripped from local governments the authority to pass rules or ordinances regarding drones, leaving that power solely to the Legislature.

The drone work group is now taking aim at private recreational and commercial drones, the machines that are often mounted with a camera that anyone can buy online or in a store without needing a license or permission.

The ACLU of Oregon, which was early to propose restrictions on the use of drones in policing, has continued looking for ways to ensure there are no privacy loopholes in the 2013 law. The group fears law enforcement could seek to get information from agencies that aren't required to follow the 2013 warrant restrictions — like the Department of Forestry — unless rules against information sharing are spelled out in state law.

The proposal the drone work group will present probably would restrict recreational drone pilots from flying around sensitive spaces, like chemical factories, dams or prisons, Huffman said. It would also likely restrict flying near wildfires. Hobby pilots have made headlines in recent years, as some have [flown camera-mounted drones above wildfires](#), hampering key air support for wildfires.

Huffman added that his drone bill, which will be one of his two allowed during the 35-day legislative session that begins Feb. 1, will be vetted and ready to pass despite the short timeline.