Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Peter A. DeFazio
Chairman
Katherine W. Dedrick
Staff Director

Sam Graves
Ranking Member
Paul J. Sass
Republican Staff Director

February 24, 2021

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

Last month, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reported nearly 1.8 million registered unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) and more than 200,000 certified remote UAS pilots in the United States.[1] The emergence and continued growth of UAS is expected to provide significant social and economic benefits in the United States. UAS operations offer a virtually unlimited number of potential applications, including inspecting critical infrastructure, surveying rural lands and agricultural crops, and delivering medical supplies and packages to a consumer's backyard. Additionally, UAS have already proven themselves to be critical tools in supporting public safety by aiding in disaster and wildfire response and search and rescue missions, among others.

The FAA is conducting a phased approach to incrementally and safely integrate existing and planned UAS operations into the National Airspace System (NAS). Since 2014, the agency has made progress in developing rulemakings, working with government and industry stakeholders, and collaborating with research organizations on efforts related to UAS integration. For example, the FAA finalized two rules in late 2020 requiring the remote identification of UAS[2] and allowing more routine operations over people and at night under certain circumstances.[3] The FAA has also issued various planning documents, including the third edition of its UAS integration roadmap, which sets forth a 5-year strategy for integration.[4]

Over the years, the FAA has initiated numerous efforts to further the research and development of integration efforts as well. These efforts include the agency's Center of Excellence for UAS Research—the Alliance for System Safety of UAS through Research Excellence

[1] FAA, *UAS by the Numbers*, https://www.faa.gov/uas/resources/by_the_numbers (last updated Jan. 26, 2021).
[2] FAA, *Remote Identification of Unmanned Aircraft*, Final Rule, 86 Fed. Reg. 4390 (Jan. 15, 2021), *available at* https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-01-15/pdf/2020-28948.pdf.
[3] FAA, *Operation of Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Over People*, Final Rule, 86 Fed. Reg. 4314 (Jan. 15, 2021), *available at* https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-01-15/pdf/2020-28947.pdf.
[4] FAA, *Integration of Civil UAS in the NAS Roadmap, Third Edition* (2020), *available at* https://www.faa.gov/uas/resources/policy_library/media/2019_UAS_Civil_Integration_Roadmap_third_edition.pdf.

(ASSURE),[5] UAS test site program,[6] and the UAS Integration (IPP)[7] and UAS Traffic Management[8] Pilot Programs, among others. The IPP concluded late last year and transitioned to the BEYOND program,[9] through which the FAA is "tackling the remaining challenges of UAS integration," including studying beyond-visual-line-of-sight operations, leveraging industry operations to better analyze the benefits of UAS operations, and focusing on community engagement efforts to collect, analyze, and address community concerns.[10]

All these efforts sound promising, but lack of clarity about how they will come together for safe UAS integration is a cause for concern. For example, it is unclear to the Committee how the BEYOND program, related rulemakings, other research, and technology development efforts, as well as operational and budget considerations, will coalesce to help realize tangible UAS integration in the NAS. Recent GAO reports on UAS safety compliance, the UAS test site program, and potential fee mechanisms for FAA services all show that the FAA faces a range of challenges to successful and timely integration. The COVID-19 pandemic has also added uncertainty to the agency's implementation timelines given the need for stakeholders to collaborate and engage in real-world testing.

As such, we are requesting a GAO review that includes the input of interested stakeholders and addresses the following questions:

1. What is the status of the FAA's UAS integration efforts, including the BEYOND program, and to what extent have these efforts been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How and when are the FAA's various UAS integration efforts intended to culminate in regular UAS operations that are fully and safely integrated into the NAS?

3. What are the lessons learned from past integration efforts, and how does the FAA plan to address them?

4. According to industry stakeholders, what additional steps are needed to address any UAS integration challenges?

5. How will the FAA measure progress and benefits made with the BEYOND program and other integration efforts, and how will the agency combine the results of various UAS activities to help realize full integration?

6. What approaches will the FAA use to obtain and address community feedback on UAS integration and ensure a range of perspectives is considered?

---

[5] ASSURE, https://www.assureuas.org/.
[6] FAA, *UAS Test Site Program*, https://www.faa.gov/uas/programs_partnerships/test_sites/.
[7] FAA, *UAS Integration Pilot Program*, https://www.faa.gov/uas/programs_partnerships/integration_pilot_program/.
[8] FAA, *UTM Pilot Program*, https://www.faa.gov/uas/research_development/traffic_management/utm_pilot_program/.
[9] *See* FAA, BEYOND, https://www.faa.gov/uas/programs_partnerships/beyond/.
[10] *Id.* According to the FAA, BEYOND "will focus on operating under established rules rather than waivers, collecting data to develop performance-based standards, collecting and addressing community feedback and understanding the societal and community benefits, and to streamline the approval processes for UAS integration."

We appreciate your attention to this request. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact [redacted] with the Subcommittee on Aviation, Majority staff, at [redacted], and [redacted] with the Subcommittee on Aviation, Minority staff, at [redacted].

Sincerely,

PETER A. DeFAZIO
Chair

SAM GRAVES
Ranking Member

RICK LARSEN
Chair
Subcommittee on Aviation

GARRET GRAVES
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Aviation