

President's Perspective

... model aviation may be facing its greatest challenge.



AMA President Dave Mathewson

Model aviation has faced its share of challenges throughout the years. Urban sprawl threatening good, established flying sites; the scrutiny that model aviation, as well as a number of other activities, came under after the attacks of 9/11; and the decades-long battle to obtain and retain frequencies set aside for aeromodeling are all examples.

AMA has risen to each of these challenges and continues to work diligently to ensure that these types of potential threats to model aviation remain minimal.

In the next few years, model aviation may be facing its greatest challenge. The proliferation of companies in the United States developing small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS) has grown exponentially. The result of these companies' efforts to build sUAS for the public-use commercial environment has resulted in the FAA's need to create regulations governing how sUAS will interface with the National Airspace System (NAS).

This regulatory process began in early 2008, when the FAA acting administrator issued an Executive Order creating an Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC). The ARC comprised more than 20 members, and AMA's government affairs representative was selected to represent model aviation and the Academy.

The charge of the ARC, as outlined in the Executive Order, was to draft recommendations that would be used as a basis to regulate the use of commercial sUAS in the NAS. Additionally, in its only reference to model aviation, the order instructed the ARC to "define a model aircraft."

The ARC completed its work in March 2009 and submitted its recommendations to the FAA. Despite the straightforward directive established in the Executive Order, the administrative interpretation and execution of the order went well beyond simply defining model aircraft. The ARC report included recommendations that would potentially regulate the operation of model aircraft in the NAS.

At the January 2010 AMA Executive Council meeting in Muncie, Indiana, two representatives from the FAA attended to update the council on this ongoing process. Attending were James Sizemore, acting manager of the Unmanned Aircraft Program Office (UAPO), and Steve Glowacki, who is the sUAS rulemaking lead and also works out of the UAPO. The men provided a lengthy overview of where the regulatory effort stood and then answered a number of questions from council members.

James and Steve sincerely want to integrate model aviation into the new regulations in a way that will have a minimal impact on what we do as model aviation enthusiasts. They have a difficult job to do and it's apparent that, in some cases, there will be no easy answers.

However, a simple analogy that became evident during their presentation was that we may be trying to put the square peg of model aviation into the round hole of trying to regulate public-use commercial sUAS. This approach won't work. It could potentially harm aeromodeling and have a damaging effect on a larger-than-perceived industry that is part of the model aviation community.

The primary visual flight rule under which all aircraft, including model aircraft, operate in the NAS is "see and avoid." This premise has worked well. Using this as our principal guideline, model aviation has an impeccable safety record. Based on the number of estimated flight hours flown by model aviation enthusiasts, model aviation is one of the safest, if not *the* safest, activity that takes place in the NAS.

So what has changed? What has occurred that has now drawn attention to model aviation—a purely recreational activity? The answer is simple: public-use commercial sUAS. However, there are some huge differences between the two types of aircraft.

Those of us who enjoy flying model aircraft do not fly them in the middle of large metropolitan areas for the purpose of taking pictures to sell to a real estate firm. We don't want to use our models as surveillance vehicles as law enforcement wants to do. We don't want to use our models in any commercial venture in order to generate an income.

There's nothing wrong with doing any of this. It's just not what *we* do. We want to operate our models within the confines of a model aircraft flying field, whether that is at a local park, a soccer field, or at a facility established specifically for model flying. *We* shouldn't be affected by the collateral impact of the FAA's need to regulate commercial sUAS.

There is one other glaring difference between model aviation and commercial sUAS and it comes back to "see and avoid." Public-use commercial sUAS are generally autonomous vehicles. They purposely do not intend to operate using see-and-avoid techniques. The best they may be able to do is use "sense and avoid," and that technology, while close, is still being perfected. Even when it is perfected, sense and avoid still will not meet the standard set by see and avoid.

AMA agrees that modelers have an obligation to operate safely in the NAS. AMA's safety guidelines have helped ensure the excellent track record we currently have. We will continue to work closely with the FAA to ensure that model aviation remains a safe activity, just as it has for more than the last seven decades; however, the best way to do that is to find a way to modify the round hole so that it fits the square peg, not the other way around.

As the regulatory process evolves, AMA will continue to keep our membership updated on its progress. For those who would like to learn more, we have created a section pertaining to this issue on the AMA Web site at www.modelaircraft.org/news/ama-faa.aspx.

During the last two-plus years, AMA has done much to improve its effort to advocate for our members. We recently took another giant step in that endeavor. AMA has engaged the services of a political strategist in Washington DC.

AMA, as a non-profit, member-based organization, is allowed to lobby but needs to work within some tight restrictions to maintain its 501(c)3 status.

The firm that we have contracted comes highly recommended and works for entities in the aviation and communications industries. This was important to AMA because much of our efforts are placed in working with the FAA and FCC. The relationship we're building will help position us in the legislative arena and help address any legislative issues that could impact model aviation in the future. **MA**

See you next time ...

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "DAVE" in all capital letters. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

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Mission Statement

The Academy of Model Aeronautics is a world-class association of modelers organized for the purpose of promotion, development, education, advancement, and safeguarding of modeling activities.

The Academy provides leadership, organization, competition, communication, protection, representation, recognition, education and scientific/technical development to modelers.