

FAA set to create 6 drone test sites

WASHINGTON - In a major step toward opening U.S. skies to thousands of unmanned drones, federal officials Thursday solicited proposals to create six drone test sites around the country.

The Federal Aviation Administration also posted online a draft plan for protecting people's privacy from the eyes in the sky. The plan would require each test site to follow federal and state laws and make a privacy policy publicly available.

Privacy advocates worry that a proliferation of drones will lead to a "surveillance society" in which the movements of Americans are routinely monitored, tracked, recorded and scrutinized by the authorities.

The military has come to rely heavily on drones overseas. Now there is tremendous demand to use drones in the U.S. for all kinds of tasks that are too dirty, dull or dangerous for manned aircraft. Drones, which range from the size of a hummingbird to the

high-flying Globalhawks that weigh about 15,000 pounds without fuel, also are often cheaper than manned aircraft. The biggest market is expected to be state and local police departments.

The FAA is required by a law enacted a year ago to develop sites where civilian and military drones can be tested in preparation for integration into U.S. airspace that's currently limited to manned aircraft.

The law also requires that the FAA allow drones wide access to U.S. airspace by 2015, but the agency is behind schedule, and it's doubtful it will meet the deadline, the Transportation Department's inspector general said in a report last year.

The test sites are planned to evaluate what requirements are needed to ensure the drones don't collide with planes or endanger people or property on the ground. Remotely controlled drones don't have a pilot who can see other aircraft the way an onboard plane or helicopter pilot can.