IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Kansas approved for first Beyond Visual Line of Sight drone flight in the nation

TOPEKA – The Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) received permission to conduct the first ever Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) drone operation in the nation leveraging only onboard detect-and-avoid systems. This is the first-ever FAA authorized operation to fly without a requirement for visual observers or ground-based radar and is the result of the 31-member Kansas Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) Integration Pilot Program (IPP) team efforts to advance drone technologies.

In a collaborative effort between Kansas State University Polytechnic Campus (K-State Polytechnic), Westar Energy, Iris Automation and KDOT, the Kansas IPP team will fly a nine-mile track to evaluate technologies to inspect power lines in rural Kansas. This approval is the first of its kind for long line linear infrastructure and is the first step to enable routine commercial infrastructure inspection across the state.

"The UAS industry has worked over 10 years to demonstrate the most significant commercial benefit of drone operations within the United States," said Bob Brock, KDOT Director of Aviation. "We are proud of the joint state, university and industry team effort that made this landmark decision possible."

"The ability to fly BVLOS missions without ground-based radar or visual observers is a significant advancement, and Westar Energy views this as an opportunity to play a key role in shaping the future of UAS operations within the utility industry," said Mike Kelly, Westar Energy Senior UAS Coordinator. "Being able to operate under this waiver allows the Kansas IPP team the ability to research and develop truly scalable BVLOS UAS operations for the automated inspection of linear infrastructure."

The Applied Aviation Research Center on the K-State Polytechnic Campus will be responsible for the training and flight operations with a cross-functional team from the KDOT IPP. Flights will take place over the next few months, providing the FAA with much-needed data on true BVLOS activity.

"We look forward to leveraging this waiver to integrate UAS technology into the transmission line inspection process," said Kurt Carraway, UAS Executive Director of the K-State Polytechnic Applied Aviation Research Center. "We are certain that utilities will be able to quickly realize a return on investment while mitigating safety to their maintenance personnel and increasing the reliability of their infrastructure to the general public."

This is the first UAV flight in history to leverage onboard sense-and-avoid systems alone for collision avoidance. It also marks the first required automated avoidance action. Historically, all FAA-issued Part 107 BVLOS waivers have required visual observers or ground-based radar. These mitigations limit the possibility of true BVLOS flights, as they are typically prohibitively expensive and limit operations to pre-defined corridor areas with radar coverage.

This important milestone is facilitated by Kansas UAS IPP partner Iris Automation's Casia onboard collision avoidance system.

"Flying rural missions like these without a human pilot onboard or costly radar on the ground is exponentially safer and more cost effective," said Iris Automation CEO and Co-Founder Alexander Harmsen. "The FAA is trusting us to pave the way for a safer, scalable future together with this precedent-setting second approval of our system."

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