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Farming Drones

UAVs in the Agriculture Industry

Farming Takes Flight Drones Save IL Farmers Time and Money / Public News Service

Posted on July 21, 2014 in Article, Featured, Link with 0 Comments



SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – Farming is taking flight in Illinois.

Researchers say interest is growing in the use of drones in agriculture, and that the unmanned aerial vehicles can give farmers a bird's eye view of their fields.

Dennis Bowman, a crop sciences educator with the University of Illinois Extension, is using two drones to take aerial snapshots of crops in the research plots on the university's South Farms.

He says it offers a quick and easy way to check on the plants' progress and determine if they need more attention.

"It does allow the opportunity to get an overall survey of the area and make a better use of your time, rather than just walking out blindly into a field of corn that's taller than your head, and hoping that you stumble across any of the problem areas that might be out there," he explains.

Bowman says his drones have computers similar to those used in smartphones

and can make flights of about 10 to 15 minutes.

He adds while the standard pictures and video are very helpful, researchers are looking to use imagery in other wavelengths, such as near-infrared, to identify areas of crop stress.

Bowman says the agriculture industry is expected to be one of the largest markets for drone usage.

He says he knows some people have concerns about their use, but he feels the technology is beneficial and can ultimately save farmers time and money.

"People think about drones and a lot of times, the negative connotations come to mind, privacy issues and those kinds of things," he says. "But in the agricultural community, we're out in the middle of nowhere most of the time, flying them over fields of crops."

There are restrictions on commercial use of unmanned aerial vehicles, but the Federal Aviation Administration is expected to release new policies by next year that would enable businesses to incorporate drones into their operations.

The cost of the drones used in farming can range from a few hundred dollars to thousands, depending on the technology.

Bowman says he's hopeful that with more interest in drones, prices will drop in the future.

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