

Sky's the limit in aerospace, group says

An Arlington group wants to parlay the strength of the region's aerospace industry into economic opportunities in the emerging field of unmanned aerial vehicles.

The U.S. military is stepping up its use of the technology while interest is also growing for local law enforcement and commercial applications.

"North Texas is a hotbed for technology and aviation, so the combination of the two makes this a perfect area" for the industry, said [Steve Mildenstein](#), program manager for unmanned aircraft systems at Fort Worth-based **Bell Helicopter**.

To cultivate a regional response to the economic opportunities, the Center for Innovation will hold the inaugural meeting of the Unmanned Aircraft Systems Consortium on Monday. The center, a nonprofit focused on technology and economic development, is working with the City of Arlington and the Arlington Police Department to form the consortium.

"This is the tip of the iceberg for UAS/UAV technology development," said [Wes Jurey](#), who heads both the Arlington Chamber of Commerce and the Center for Innovation. "If we're ever going to be a catalyst to build an industry cluster in North Texas, then we've got to find the emergent technology arenas."

Annual spending on unmanned aerial vehicles is projected to double during the next 10 years from \$5.9 billion to \$11.3 billion, totaling more than \$94 billion over the decade, according to a 2011 study by the **Teal Group Corp.**, a Virginia-based market analysis firm.

Meanwhile, the **Federal Aviation Administration** is studying how to integrate unmanned aircraft into its rules for the national airspace. President [Obama](#) signed a law this month that set a 2015 deadline for the FAA to come up with regulation for UAVs.

The UAS Consortium wants to encourage the transition of the technology from federal agencies to the commercial sector, develop a local manufacturing base for the technology, facilitate research and training in the industry, and develop access to airspace for the vehicles.

Jurey said the business opportunities range widely across the hardware, software, components and services associated with the unmanned aircraft, the cameras and sensors they carry, and the communications and ground-control systems that operate them.

Dallas-based Aerial Specialties Inc. provides support for companies that need to test equipment for unmanned aerial systems, including airborne tests on manned flights, as well as other services.

[Brett Griffin](#), Aerial Specialties president, said he expects the use of unmanned aircraft systems to spread first to law enforcement agencies and then to commercial applications as the public gets more comfortable with the concept.

"We're at the base level, and it's going to build from here," Griffin said. "I think that's largely due to the expansion into the commercial arena. The uses are pretty much limitless when you start thinking about what's currently being done by manned aviation. There's so much out there that can be done on a more cost-effective basis."

During the past year, you may have caught a glimpse of a UAV flying in the Arlington area. The Arlington Police Department is one of only a few local law enforcement agencies in the nation with FAA approval to fly unmanned aerial vehicles under tight restrictions.

Arlington police have been testing and evaluating UAVs in an area near Lake Arlington. The department leased a Leptron Avenger and is now purchasing two of the small helicopters for \$100,000 each, Chief [Theron Bowman](#) said. The vehicles weigh 11 pounds, measure about 5 feet long and 2 feet high, and can carry about 10 pounds.

Arlington is now seeking FAA approval to expand the flight area and “also to do it for some actual law enforcement scenarios to test the vehicle’s capability,” Bowman said.

That could include monitoring vehicle or train wreck scenes, identifying hot spots in smoldering fires, monitoring warrant services, or identifying marijuana grow houses, he said. He said the department plans to use UAVs for emergency response or mission-specific assignments, not routine patrols.

“It’s important to make the distinction between a law enforcement vehicle and a military vehicle,” Bowman said. “A military vehicle is not appropriate for domestic law enforcement use.”

Bell Helicopter has been working on programs related to unmanned aircraft systems for years, Mildenstein said. Currently, Bell is working on a joint project with **Northrop Grumman Corp.** to produce the Fire-X, a 34-foot-long unmanned helicopter. Bell Helicopter’s XWorx team at the Arlington Municipal Airport is working on the project.

“The growth of unmanned aircraft has been exponential over the past few years, while the latest successes of the recent war endeavors have brought UASs to the spotlight,” Mildenstein said. “The commercial side is just now beginning to open their eyes to some of the things that the military has known for a long time.”

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