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Drones Eyed as Tools in Traffic War.

A new Georgia Tech study found unmanned aircraft — commonly known as drones — could be used to help the Georgia Department of Transportation count vehicles on the highway to analyze traffic congestion and or to help with accident investigations.

The \$75,000 study, commissioned by GDOT to explore the potential benefits of drones, came up with more than 40 tasks they could help with.

The goal of the study was to “take a look into the future and see how this could help us,” said Georgene Geary, research engineer at GDOT. There could be safety benefits and cost savings, but there’s “still some unanswered questions” for a cost-benefit analysis, she said. And there are other issues to address, including federal regulations and privacy concerns.

Potential uses for drones include everything from traffic management to inspections of traffic signals after installation or sampling vehicle speed along particular corridors. Drones could also be used for other GDOT tasks such as inspecting bridges for damage, conducting airport flight path inspections or monitoring wildlife along intracoastal waterways, such as birds nesting in the Savannah Harbor area, the study found.

But it would likely be a couple of years or more before drones actually begin flying for GDOT.

GDOT expects it would likely contract out operations of unmanned aircraft, rather than buy its own drones. For now, it’s generally illegal to use unmanned aircraft for commercial purposes. The Federal Aviation Administration is still developing regulations to cover unmanned aircraft, with the first proposed rule expected later this year. The FAA has been tasked by Congress to come up with a plan to integrated unmanned aircraft into the airspace by Sept. 30, 2015.

For GDOT, potential use of unmanned aircraft “kind of hinges on the rules,” Geary said. “You want to make sure it’s safe. You don’t want to affect air travel... I know there’s still a privacy concern, too.”

Javier Irizarry, a lead author of the study at Georgia Tech, said he expects that once the FAA regulations that enable commercial use of drones are complete and issues like insurance coverage are worked out, “I think there’s going to be a lot more people using it.”

“Technology evolves very fast and it gets cheaper very quickly,” Irizarry said.

BY KELLY YAMANOUCHI, MCCLATCHY NEWS SERVICE / JUNE 9, 2014

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