

United States Senate

May 15, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20590

The Honorable Steve Dickson
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Secretary Chao and Administrator Dickson,

We hope this letter finds you in good health. We are writing regarding an urgent matter related to the public health emergency.

As a result of the need for social distancing and self-quarantining to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our constituents cannot access health care essentials, such as medicines, medical devices, and personal protective equipment. We hope you agree that first responders, public health agencies, and retailers need to have the ability to utilize emerging technology solutions that can deliver these necessities in a timely and safe manner, such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), more commonly known as drones.

Madam Secretary, in public remarks you made, in the fall 2017, when you announced the Drone Integration Pilot Program (IPP), you acutely underscored the importance of drone technology in disaster response, stating *“So, the possibilities for drone use are as endless as the human imagination. And a safe, robust drone industry could have a significant economic impact on our country, generating billions of dollars for our economy and creating tens of thousands of new jobs... Our job is to prepare the way for this new technology, so it can be safely deployed and usher in a new era of aviation service, accessibility, and capability.”* We agree there are tremendous opportunities today for this technology to help our society during this time of crisis and to serve as an economic driver for America as we recover from the pandemic. In rural America alone, this technology can help shrink distances, provide lifesaving solutions, and create good paying jobs in a field with limitless potential.

For years, beyond visual-line-of-sight (BVLOS) drone deliveries under Part 107 and Part 135 have been occurring with the approval of federal test-sites and pilot programs, as well as with the help of regulatory waivers. While these UAS operations typically have various limitations and restrictions, they have proven to provide deliveries safely and without increasing risk to other users of the National Airspace System.

We have already seen the virtues of drone applications in protecting our environment, aiding law enforcement and first responders in life threatening situations, and supporting smart transportation solutions like traffic management. With the data available from the IPP and through public-private coordination with the FAA, it is time to expand the safe integration of drone technology into more of our daily lives. In Nevada alone, we have seen a drone company successfully transport consumer products, work directly with first responders, and deliver critical packages like automated external defibrillator (AED) devices.

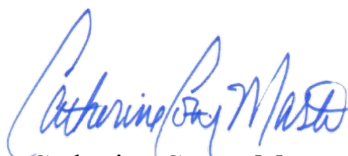
In light of the ongoing battle against COVID-19, we call on the U.S. Department of Transportation to enable an expedited pathway for commercial and public entities to stand up BVLOS drone package delivery operations for medical, healthcare, and other critical public needs. There is a strong case for temporarily waiving these regulatory limitations on UAS operations that will expand our communities' access to vital resources, provided that delivery by UAS can be done in a safe and efficient manner. That possibility will help guide us to further provide a future pathway to making these opportunities more permanent.

Furthermore, if there are resources or other legislative actions that are required to support these new UAS applications, please share those needs with Congress expeditiously.

As we look to strengthen our ability to respond to the continued challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as future emergencies, we know that drones can be a vital tool in our toolbox that can be leveraged to meet the needs of our society. With your leadership, the U.S. can emerge from COVID-19 relief efforts with a deeper understanding of how to harness UAS by providing real-time assistance to the people in our states hardest hit by its effects.

Thank you for your attention to this timely matter. We look forward to your response as soon as possible in order to help assist as you tackle the Nation's greatest public health challenge in modern history.

Sincerely,



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senate



Jacky Rosen
United States Senate