

U.S. Interior Approves Use of DJI Drones

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The U.S. Interior Department (the Interior) authorized government officials to buy drones from DJI Technology (DJI) after a previous warning that the company may act as a channel for Chinese government espionage. However, Mark Bathrick, Director of the Office of Aviation Services, said, “[This authorization is] a very narrow, very specific, very limited authorization. We’re doing the very best we can to make sure the data we collect is secure.”

While the U.S. Homeland Security Department warned companies back in May that data may be at risk if they use DJI drones, the Interior’s officials are looking to significantly expand their drone fleet, and there is a limited number of drone vendors to choose from according to Bathrick.

After a failed relationship with another drone manufacturer, the Interior started working with DJI back in 2017 to develop drones outfitted with custom hardware, software and firmware that addressed the data management risks associated with the drones. This “Government Edition” DJI drone is air-gapped from both the Interior’s IT infrastructure and the public internet in order to help prevent unauthorized exfiltration of the data. Bathrick explained that the Interior will upload the software for each drone and then manually download any data collected during the flight.

This approval came 15 months after performance and security testing; the same rigorous tests are expected to be performed on the software upgrades as well. Additionally, currently, operators for the Interior are only authorized to use the DJI drone for “non-sensitive missions whose... data is publicly releasable.”

Bathrick said that the government “should treat all technology as if it’s a potential security risk, regardless of where its [manufactured].”

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