

Clinic gets approved medical supply drop by drone in Virginia

July 21 2015, by Nancy Owano



Credit: Flirtey

Flirtey is a drone delivery company from Australia specializing in last-mile delivery using unmanned vehicles, and it recently marked July 17 as a day going down in history—the first drone delivery, government-

approved, in the U.S., with packages of medical supplies getting to its source, a clinic in Virginia.

These were research flights that got an FAA Certificate of Authorization. The flights were in a [partnership](#) program with Virginia Tech and NASA to participate in the [drone](#) project. The drone was on an errand to deliver pharmaceuticals and other [medical supplies](#) during research flights at a free [medical clinic](#) in Wise on July 17.

A statement from NASA said "Some underserved Virginia patients were among the first to be officially helped by an Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS), more commonly known as a drone, during research flights to a medical clinic in Wise County Friday. In accordance with research flight plans authorized by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), a full-sized aircraft operated by NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton and a hexacopter drone operated by Flirtey Inc., a drone startup company, delivered pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies to an outdoor free clinic. The annual clinic, which is held at the Wise County Fairgrounds, is run by Remote Area Medical and the Health Wagon, a local health [care](#) outreach organization. It typically serves more than 1,500 patients."

The Wall Street Journal presented an account of how things went on the July 17 delivery day: "A manned aircraft carried the packages most of the way, and the flight plan originally called for the drone to make six round trips to carry a total of 10 pounds. But after two successful deliveries, officials decided to send the rest of the payload in one flight."

Gizmag's Nick Lavars explained why this was a significant day in Wise County: One weekend each July, people from the rural area of Wise County go to the [local](#) fairgrounds for a medical clinic where they can seek attention for conditions that go untreated for the rest of the year due to difficulties in healthcare access. In years gone by, medical

supplies would be brought into the town by truck.

The Wall Street Journal report similarly noted how medications are prescribed by doctors at the annual Remote Area Clinic, a facility in the state's Wise County, which serves patients one weekend a [year](#).

"This is a Kitty Hawk moment not just for Flirtey, but for the entire industry," said Flirtey Chief Executive Officer Matt Sweeny in *The Roanoke Star*. "Proving that [unmanned aircraft](#) can deliver lifesaving medicines is an important step toward a future where unmanned [aircraft](#) make routine autonomous deliveries of your everyday purchases."

Flirtey said, "We're interested in working with companies in time-sensitive last mile logistics; including online retail, fast food, letters and parcels, urgent medical delivery, etc." The site said they are interested in working with companies in New Zealand. "For other companies around the [world](#), please inquire with your aviation authority if they will support a drone delivery trial in your country, and let us know."

As for safety, the company said it was "developing advanced technology such as multiple redundant backup systems, so it can lose a battery or a rotor and still land safely. We'll be building Flirteys to pass stringent safety [approvals](#)."

This was no pizza and home movie transaction. Michelle Hackman and Jack Nicas in *The Wall Street Journal* noted that the July event was a government approved demo.

"The FAA gave Flirtey, NASA and Virginia Tech special approval for Friday's demonstration, but it effectively bans drone deliveries. The FAA's proposed drone rules, expected to be made final next year, prohibit flights over people, in cities and beyond sight of the drone's operator. The rules would also prohibit drones from carrying objects,"

said *The Wall Street Journal*.

David Murphy, writing in *PCMag*, said, "it's certainly possible that trials like these—approved by the FAA as a one-off item—could help show the usefulness and safety of drone [delivery](#)."

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