

Amazon gets FAA approval allowing it to expand drone deliveries for online orders

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Federal regulators have given Amazon key permission that will allow it to expand its drone delivery program, the company announced Thursday.

In a blog post published on its website, Seattle-based Amazon said that the Federal Aviation Administration has given its Prime Air delivery service the OK to operate drones "beyond visual line of sight," removing a barrier that has prevented its drones from traveling longer distances.

With the approval, Amazon pilots can now operate drones remotely without seeing it with their own eyes. An FAA spokesperson said the approval applies to College Station, Texas, where the company launched drone deliveries in late 2022.

Amazon said its planning to immediately scale its operations in that city in an effort to reach customers in more densely populated areas. It says the approval from regulators also "lays the foundation" to scale its operations to more locations around the country.

Businesses have wanted simpler rules that could open neighborhood skies to new commercial applications of drones, but privacy advocates and some airplane and balloon pilots remain wary.

Amazon, which has sought this permission for years, said it received approval from regulators after developing a strategy that ensures its drones could detect and avoid obstacles in the air.

Furthermore, the company said it submitted other engineering information to the FAA and conducted flight demonstrations in front of federal inspectors. Those demonstrations were also done "in the presence of real planes, helicopters, and a hot air balloon to demonstrate how the drone safely navigated away from each of them," Amazon said.

The FAA's approval marks a key step for the company, which has had ambitions to deliver online orders through drones for more than a decade. During a TV interview in 2013, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos said drones would be flying to customer's homes within five years. However,

the company's progress was delayed amid regulatory setbacks.

Last month, Amazon said it would close a drone delivery site in Lockeford, California—one of only two in the nation—and open another one later this year in Tolleson, Arizona, a city located west of Phoenix.

By the end of the decade, the company has a goal of delivering 500 million packages by drone every year.

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