

FedEx, Walgreens team with Wing for drone delivery test

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Wing, the drone delivery unit of Google parent Alphabet, will start making deliveries in a pilot project in Virginia

Drone deliveries are coming soon, at least for one Virginia community, as part of a pilot project announced Thursday by Wing, the unit spun out of a "moonshot" lab at Google parent Alphabet.

The drone service to launch in October in Christiansburg, Virginia, will be the most advanced real-world test of the technology to quickly fly items ranging from Gummy Bears to painkillers to customers, Wing chief executive James Burgess said Thursday.

"By delivering small packages directly to homes through the air in minutes, and making a wide range of medicine, food and other products available to customers, we will demonstrate what we expect safer, faster, cleaner local delivery to look like in the future," Burgess said.

Joining the pilot project will be delivery giant FedEx, retail and pharmacy outlet Walgreens and local ice cream and gifts retailer Sugar Magnolia.

The Wing project is one of several in the works from major tech firms such as Amazon and Uber and startups like Flirtey, seeking speedy delivery of consumer goods and medical supplies.

Earlier this year, Wing became the first drone operation to be certified as an air carrier by the US Federal Aviation Administration, clearing the regulatory path for it to make deliveries to buyers.

Customers will need to live in designated delivery areas, and sign up for the service.

Wing drones weighing about 4.5 kilos (10 pounds) will carry goods in specially designed containers, hovering in the air and lowering packages by winch to designated drop zones outside people's homes.

Cargo will be limited to no more than 1.3 kilos (three pounds), and the times from ordering something to it being plopped outside homes was expected to be minutes.

Items that will be available for delivery from US drugstore chain Walgreens include children's snacks and over-the-counter drugs such as cold or pain medicines, according to Vish Sankaran, chief innovation officer at Walgreens Boots Alliance.

"With this pilot, Walgreens will be in a unique position to capitalize on the convenience of drone delivery if and when it should expand," Sankaran said.



Amazon recently showed a drone design for its "Prime Air" fleet and expects to begin large-scale deliveries by drone in the coming months

Dog treats and burritos

The Wing team completed its first real-world deliveries in 2014 in rural Australia where they successfully transported first-aid supplies, candy bars, dog treats, and water to farmers, according to the company's website.

Two years after that, Wing drones were used to deliver burritos to students at a university in Virginia.

Wing drones carrying packages for Walgreens and FedEx will have a range of about 10 kilometers (six miles). They will take off and land from a control facility, and remain airborne during deliveries, according to Burgess.

Drones will hover about six meters (20 feet) above the ground while lowering packages on lines designed to release when items touch ground, Wing said.

The lines will automatically detach if they get caught on anything.

Wing engineers are working to reduce the drone noise, which Burgess said was quieter than cars or trucks.

The drones fly about 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour, with Wing saying the aircraft was so speedy that ice cream delivered in blazing heat of summer was still frozen on arrival.

Wing is using safety and security technology to prevent interception or "bad acting" involving its drones, according to its chief.

Wing will not charge fees for drone deliveries, with customer transactions handled directly with merchants.

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