

FAA: Drone sightings on pace to quadruple this year

 **Bart Jansen, USA TODAY**

WASHINGTON – Aircraft pilots are reporting a dramatic increase in drone sightings to the Federal Aviation Administration, with the number on pace to quadruple for the year, increasing concerns of a potentially dangerous collision.

On Sunday, four airline crews reported seeing drones while approaching Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey at 2,000 to 3,000 feet in the air. All landed safely without taking evasive action.

Capt. Chesley Sullenberger, a retired US Airways pilot who made an emergency landing on the Hudson River in New York after geese knocked out the engines of his Airbus A320 in January 2009, said drones with hard batteries and electronics worried him even more than lighter, softer birds.

"It could do great damage and could be catastrophic," said Sullenberger, who is now a safety consultant and best-selling author.

Pilots from a variety of aircraft reported 650 drone sightings this year through Aug. 9, compared with 238 sightings in all of 2014, the FAA announced Thursday.

"It's a startling number," said Steve Marks, a Miami aviation lawyer, who said airline pilots might not see all the drones flying around them while concentrating on landing at 150 to 200 mph. "It's going to exacerbate an already dangerous situation."

The Global Gateway Alliance, an advocacy group for New York-area airports, urged the FAA to better enforce no-fly zones and require that drones be equipped with programming that prevents them from entering restricted areas.

"When it comes to our airports, safety has to come first," said Joe Sitt, the alliance's founder and chairman. "It is past time for the FAA to step up and protect the nation's most crowded airspace for the 117 million passengers who use it every year."

Firefighters battling western wildfires have grounded aircraft several times for safety reasons after spotting drones nearby. During a June wildfire in the San Bernardino Mountains in California, firefighting aircraft spotted a drone 500 feet away from planes flying higher than 10,000 feet. A forest aviation officer at the scene said it wasn't a "near miss with respect to an





incident, but certainly an aircraft in our airspace that we were not prepared for."

FAA is developing comprehensive rules for drones. For now, drone hobbyists must stay below 400 feet and commercial drone pilots must stay below 500 feet – and both must avoid flying within 5 miles of an airport unless they have the air-traffic control tower's permission. Remote drone pilots must also keep their aircraft within sight and fly only during the day.

The FAA works with local law enforcement to investigate drone sightings. Despite the threat of civil and criminal penalties, enforcement can be difficult for authorities on the ground to mobilize fast enough to find the remote drone pilot.

The FAA is working with the commercial industry and hobbyists on an educational campaign called "Know Before You Fly," to notify pilots where they can operate within the rules. Despite the effort, Sullenberger said a smaller number of drone pilots just don't care.

"It enables a few people to do stupid, reckless things with them," he said. "It's of great concern."

Dave Mathewson, executive director of the 176,000-member Academy of Model Aeronautics, said the FAA should enforce its rules better against reckless drones and finalize comprehensive regulations.

"We support the FAA taking a more aggressive approach to assessing civil penalties against operators violating those rules," he said.

Some legislators say new laws and regulations are needed.

"The new data released by the FAA should sound the alarm" for greater regulations, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said after drones delayed firefighting flights last month and after a medical helicopter nearly collided Wednesday with a drone above Fresno.