



Choctaws chosen for drone pilot program

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A drone takes to the air in 2011 as students from middle and high schools compete with flying drones at the University of Oklahoma's Rawls Engineering Practice Facility in Norman.

[The Oklahoman Archives]

The Choctaw Nation will take part in a federal pilot program for unmanned aircraft systems – or drones – the Department of Transportation announced Wednesday.

"We realize that this technology has the potential to change our daily lives in many positive ways," said Choctaw Chief Gary Batton. "This program will enable and foster technology and creativity in a safe environment."

The tribe was the first of 10 awardees announced at a ceremony in Washington on Wednesday afternoon. Batton shook hands with Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao after the announcement.

"These pilot projects will help to develop the know-how to safely integrate drones into our national airspace," Chao said, "and that's key to ensuring that the development of this new technology remains in the United States and it's vital to ensuring that America reaps the important benefits of this new technology."

More than 200 tribal, state and city governments applied for the pilot program. The winners must work with private companies to test drones and their applications. The federal government hopes allowing them to do so will shed light on which regulations are needed and which regulations can be scrapped.

"I am pleased that this competitive pilot program will also bring jobs, educational opportunities and economic growth to southeastern Oklahoma," said U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Tulsa.

Members of Oklahoma's congressional delegation, with the exception of then-Rep. Jim Bridenstine, asked Chao in January to "give full consideration to" the Choctaws' proposal.

"Based on the tribe's unique land and business holdings, along with fast-growing industry relationships, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

is ideally-positioned to be an important partner to those industries in the years ahead,” the delegation wrote.

The Choctaws applied in December, two months after President Donald Trump announced the initiative. Results from the program are expected to accelerate the use of drones in American airspace.

“The Choctaw Nation has always supported technology innovations,” Batton said.

