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Walmart shows off new drone technology to replace workers

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Walmart is coming close to adding drones to its daily workforce to help the retailer monitor inventory in its warehouses. Once testing is complete in six to nine months, drones could shorten work processes currently taking a month to just one day.

Walmart's Vice President of Engineering Sciences, Shekar Natarajan, showed off the megastore's new drone technology on Thursday, ahead of its annual shareholder meeting.

Natarajan displayed the drone's maneuvers by flying it up and down the aisles of a warehousing center near its Bentonville, Arkansas headquarters.

The remotely controlled drone snaps pictures at a rate of 30 per second in order to catalogue products on shelves and immediately alert the user to when goods are running out or incorrectly

stocked. The Walmart drone has three indicators – green, blue and red. Red stands for a stocking error and blue signals that a product is missing. Green means everything’s OK.



“We are still in early phases of testing and understanding how drones can be better used in different types of business functions,” Natarajan said.

The drone is particularly useful for checking stocks. The device will be able to scan as many products in a day as a worker is able to manually scan using hand-held devices in a month, significantly reducing the labor intensive process.

The technology could *“potentially”* reduce the number of workers required to conduct this kind of work, while other staffers would be deployed in other areas of the warehouse, Lorenzo Lopez, a Walmart spokesman, said, according to The New York Times.

“It’s really the technology that mounts on the drones that makes it very important,” Natarajan said.

During six to nine months of testing, Walmart will try to understand whether it should deploy more drones in its 190 distribution centers across the US, each one of which serves 100 to 150 stores.

Last October, Walmart sought the green light from the Federal Aviation Administration to start testing drones for delivering online orders, joining Amazon and Google.

Walmart seeks go-ahead to test drone delivery

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Walmart is seeking the green light to start testing drones for delivering online orders. America's top retailer joins Amazon and Google in officially applying to US regulators for permission after months of testing UAVs indoors.

The company plans to use Chinese-made drones to deliver purchases to customers at Walmart facilities, as well as consumer homes once it's given a go-ahead from the Federal Aviation Administration, Reuters reported. The retailer also wants to use drones to check warehouse inventories for its grocery pickup service and to make distribution more efficient.

If permitted, the test flights would show whether drones could be used for delivering packages to a pick-up points in Walmart's parking lots, the retailer's application said.

"Drones have a lot of potential to further connect our vast network of stores, distribution centers, fulfillment centers and transportation fleet," Walmart spokesman Dan Toporek told Reuters.

"There is a Walmart within five miles of 70 percent of the US population, which creates some unique and interesting possibilities for serving customers with drones."

The commercial use of drones in US skies is currently illegal, but companies can apply in order to receive the FAA's permission. With this move, Walmart follows those of online giants Amazon and Google, which are also waiting for FAA's final approval to use unmanned flying devices.

Walmart says it is ready to start its outdoor trials as soon as it is given a green light by the US aviation regulator. Typically it takes the FAA 120 days to consider such petitions.

Agency spokesman Les Dorr explained to Reuters that the FAA needs to review Walmart's application to see if it's similar to the earlier requests, in which case the whole process would take less time. If it sets a precedent, though, the FAA needs to conduct detailed risk analysis and seek public comment.

The FAA has approved 1,891 special permits as of October 15 for purposes varying from aerial photography, pipeline inspections and agricultural monitoring.

Last week, the FAA established rules for both hobbyist and commercial drone pilots. Both types are required to avoid flying within five miles of an airport unless they have the air-traffic control tower's permission. Commercial drone haves also been obliged to fly below 500 feet.

The FAA is still crafting final rules for the use of commercial drones in the US. In June, the agency said it hoped to finalize rules with the next 12 months.

While waiting, some companies managed to still test drones, bypassing the US regulator's regulations. Google had been testing its single-wing "Project Wing" delivery drone over private land that it was leasing from NASA, while Amazon took its UAVs to in Canada.

Google leases NASA airbase for robots, planes and space exploration

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Search firm signs 60-year, \$1.16bn lease to renovate three large hangars at a NASA airfield outside of San Francisco including historic Hangar One

Google has leased Moffett Naval Airfield in San Francisco including the historic Hangar One as part of its expansion into robotics, aviation and space exploration. Photograph: Aerial Archives/Alamy

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Google has leased a NASA airfield in San Francisco, which includes three hangars capable of housing robotics research and space-exploration vehicles.

The 60-year, \$1.16bn (£732m) lease of Moffett Field Naval Air Station on the San Francisco peninsula includes a \$200m commitment to refurbish the hangars and improve the site with a museum and educational facilities.

“As Nasa expands its presence in space, we are making strides to reduce our footprint here on Earth,” said the Nasa administrator Charles Bolden in a press release. “Moffett Field plays an important role in the Bay Area and is poised to continue to do so through this lease arrangement.”

“We look forward to rolling up our sleeves to restore the remarkable landmark Hangar One, which for years has been considered one of the most endangered historic sites in the United States,” said David Radcliffe, vice president of real estate and workplace services at Google.

Google declined to comment further on its plans for the airfield.

Space exploration, aviation and robotics

The 1,000 acre site includes a private golf course, a working airfield, two runways, an operations building and three large hangars, including the historic Hangar One. Google secured the lease through its real estate subsidiary Planetary Ventures for “research, development, assembly and testing in the areas of space exploration, aviation, rover/robotics and other emerging technologies”.

Google’s founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, have expressed interests in both aviation and space exploration before, offering a \$20m prize to any private company that can land a robot on the moon, travel 500m and send back images before the end of 2015.

The company recently acquired several robotics and satellite firms, including Boston Dynamics – the robotics outfit responsible for the military robotic packhorse Big Dog, the running robot Cheetah and the humanoid robot Atlas.

The robotics, satellite and space ventures fall under Google’s “moonshot” X Lab responsible for Google Glass, Project Loon and most recently a venture into health care and medical equipment including a cancer- and heart-attack detecting pill.

‘Important landmark in Silicon Valley’

Hangar One at Moffett is one of the world’s largest freestanding structures covering eight acres, built in the 1930s as a hangar for US naval airships, including the USS Macon built in 1933. The hangar is so big that weather such as fog can form inside, just under the ceiling.

The 60m high building was designated as a US Naval Historical Monument in 1966 but was listed as one of the US's 11 most endangered historic places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2008.

Moffet is situated next to Google's "Googleplex" headquarters on the San Francisco Bay, near Mountain View, Palo Alto and Santa Clara. It is already being used by Google to store its private jets, while a section of the land forms part of Google's expanding campus.

"Hangar One is an important landmark in Silicon Valley," said US General Services Administration (GSA) administrator Dan Tangherlini. "GSA was proud to support NASA in delivering the best value to taxpayers while restoring this historic facility and enhancing the surrounding community."