

Drones are proving to be a valuable tool for adjusters

MAR 22, 2016 | BY [JOEL MAKHLUF](#)



Drones provide safe access to assess roofs, balconies and other areas that could be dangerous for adjusters to reach. (Photo: iStock)

When adjusters go out to a property to investigate a claim, it can be difficult and even potentially hazardous for them to gather evidence. Gaining access to a damaged roof, photographing the aftermath of a tornado, or inspecting the site of a fire can all prove problematic.

However, there is a new technology option that provides an innovative solution. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), more commonly known as drones, can be used to get the photos or video required during inspection. Erie Insurance is just one insurer that has used this technology to inspect the roof of a customer's home following ice-

dam damage, and to capture aerial photos of another customer's roof after it was struck by a fallen tree.

"I think the possibilities around building-damage inspection are pretty much endless," explained Gary Sullivan, vice president of property and subrogation claims at Erie Insurance in Erie, Pa.

"They can also be helpful in surveying damage in widespread storm situations such as tornados, where there are a lot of downed trees and power lines, or when access to an area may be limited. We may be able to capture a better view of damage in those areas via a drone. The sooner we can get in and assess damage, the sooner we can settle claims and help make our customers whole again so they can move on with their lives."

Drones can be remotely piloted, so there's no need for the adjuster to take any unnecessary risks with his or her personal safety. Drones can take aerial photos or videos of a property or an area that may be difficult using conventional methods. In the hands of a skilled pilot, UAVs can get up close and take detailed photographs of nearly any damage. Erie's [video](#) demonstrates how the company uses them to inspect roof damage.



The FAA is still writing the final regulations for the use of commercial and personal drones.

(Photo: iStock)

Rules and regulations

The benefits are clear, but any insurer considering employing drones must be aware of the rules and regulations. You have to apply to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for an exemption to fly drones commercially, all drones must be registered with the FAA, and commercial drone operators need a private pilot certification.

While there are scores of recreational drones on the market that can be picked up for under \$100, the higher-end UAVs typically come equipped with high-resolution cameras, navigation software, and auto landing features. “We can set up a geo fence around the property so we don't fly outside of those virtual boundary markers. We can also put a ceiling on our flight so we don't fly any higher than a particular altitude,” says Sullivan. “That makes it easy to keep drones within property limits.”

Following FAA regulations, each commercial flight must be conducted by a licensed pilot along with another individual serving as an observer and maintaining visual contact at all times.

FAA restrictions dictate that drones cannot be used within five miles of an air traffic-controlled airport, and even small airfields that are not air traffic-controlled must be notified if drones are in use nearby. Drones must also maintain a certain level of battery power, just as airplanes must carry reserve fuel.

Rules concerning the recreational use of drones are much less stringent. However, as drones became more popular with the public, the FAA has been reviewing the regulations and there is some hope that it may relax the rules for commercial drone operators later this year.



The use of drones as part of an insurance claim inspection allows adjusters to quickly gather information related to a loss. (Photo: iStock)

Positive customer response

Fears that customers may have privacy concerns or resist the use of drones by insurers seem to be unfounded.

“What’s been interesting is that we have not found objection coming from our policyholders,” says Sullivan. “Our policyholders have been very open with us utilizing

this technology to assist them with their claims. Also, we will always ask a customer's permission before using a drone on any property. Because this is a new type of technology, we want our customers to be comfortable with its use."

Customers have been quick to see the sense in using drones. The process is potentially much faster than a traditional inspection. It can also be far less intrusive for the customer.

Once the drone has done its job, downloading the photos from the camera onto the adjuster's laptop is quick and easy. The end result is a streamlined claims process and that is a win for customers and carriers.

Erie has a fleet of eight drones, with six qualified pilots and two visual observers. With the news that USAA and AIG are the latest insurers to gain FAA approval to use drones, this trend is clearly taking off. Drone use is expected to be widespread in the insurance industry within the next few years.

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