

U.S. Military and Industry Struggle with Small Drone Acquisition Challenges

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U.S. defense officials and industry partners face persistent challenges in acquiring small, unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS), as evolving technologies, disjointed acquisition programs, and dependence on foreign components hinder progress.

The U.S. Air Force recently requested input from private industry to help shape a commercial roadmap for small drones, particularly vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) platforms weighing between 1 and 25 kilograms. These drones serve crucial roles in tactical reconnaissance, disaster response, and critical infrastructure missions. Domestic suppliers face intense competition, especially from Chinese manufacturers, and must navigate increasing national security concerns.

In parallel, the U.S. Army is managing several SUAS procurement programs simultaneously. The U.S. Air Force recently requested input from private industry to help shape a commercial roadmap for small drones, particularly vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) platforms weighing between 1 and 25 kilograms. Army officials have acknowledged overlapping efforts but defend the approach as a way to test various platforms in real-world scenarios before consolidating around the most effective solutions. Instead of locking into a single vendor, the Army intends to source from multiple suppliers to foster innovation and flexibility.

The Pentagon is committing additional resources to speed the progress and operational use of small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS). The Army allocated approximately \$21 million in fiscal year 2025 to acquire 540 SRR systems. It is gearing up to launch the Replicator 2 initiative, intended to address small drone threats near vital defence assets, to deploy operational systems within two years.

The commercial drone sector remains highly saturated, with numerous start-ups competing for limited military contracts. Many offer similar platforms, but few are equipped for long-term production or resilient supply chains. This fragmented vendor landscape may fall short of

meeting the military's growing demand for scalable, cost-effective drone capabilities.

The Army continues to invest in counter-drone technologies, including the Mobile Low Slow Small UAS Integrated Defeat System (M-LIDS), high-power microwaves, and directed-energy weapons. However, deploying these solutions remains complicated due to legal and jurisdictional restrictions, especially within U.S. borders.

Military leaders emphasize the need for attainable, modular drone systems that can be rapidly produced and adapted to evolving operational requirements. Drawing lessons from recent conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, U.S. planners stress adaptability, affordability, and field-driven design as key to shaping future drone strategies.

To maintain an edge in unmanned capabilities, U.S. officials and defense contractors agree that procurement processes must be streamlined, programs consolidated, and domestic manufacturing reinforced.