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Press Release

Release of DHS OIG Audit of CBP Drone Program Highlights Complexity of Government Aviation Programs

Woodbridge, VA – January 9, 2015 – The Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General released a report yesterday that concluded that the Custom and Border Protection’s Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) Program was neither meeting its flight hours goals nor its program expectations. The report estimated it costs \$12,255 per flight hour to operate the program.

The DHS OIG concluded the report with four recommendations, including that DHS undertake an independent study to determine whether “additional unmanned aircraft are needed and justified; and future funding should be used to invest in the current program

or invested in other alternatives, such as manned aircraft and ground assets, to enhance surveillance needs.”



or invested in other alternatives, such as manned aircraft and ground assets, to enhance surveillance needs.” CBP’s response, included as an Appendix to the report, took issue with DHS OIG’s conclusions. In particular, CBP disagreed with the report’s method of calculating cost per flight hour, asserting that only variable costs should have been included, resulting in a figure of \$2,468 per flight hour. CBP also stated that its UAS program had met

the majority of the planned performance objectives and that the Report focused on inappropriate or outdated metrics.

Joe Fluet, CEO of Momentum Aviation Group, has extensive experience operating fixed wing, rotary wing, and unmanned aviation programs around the world for federal, global,

and commercial customers. A former Military Reconnaissance Pilot, Joe helped start the Afghan Air Force in 2004 and has advised policymakers at all levels on creating and running specialty aviation programs. Below, he answers the most pressing questions facing Government Aviation programs after the release of the DHS OIG Report:

In response to these Report, do you expect CBP to cancel the UAS program?

No. CBP has invested significant time and effort to create a complex unmanned aviation program along the Southern Border and to integrate it with the rest of its air fleet (which is substantial — hundreds of aircraft). It views the program as a success. As stated in its response, CBP plans to revise the Concept of Operations for the UAS program.

Do you think unmanned aerial systems (UAS) such as Predators are appropriate for use along the Border by CBP?

UAS are excellent at so-called “dull, dirty, and dangerous” missions. Predators were originally developed for those types of missions overseas – gathering imagery for long periods of time over terrain where the United States did not want to risk a pilot. The downside is their cost – while the Predator itself is “unmanned”, the system supporting it requires a lot of manpower: operators, sensor operators, operation center personnel, mechanics, analysts, and other support staff. However, CBP uses all types of aviation platforms: unmanned drones, manned aircraft, and helicopters. Many of the same missions performed by unmanned systems like Predators can be performed just as capably by less costly manned aircraft. In some cases, the best solution is a combination of manned and unmanned systems working in tandem. The DHS OIG report did not discuss whether the CBP aviation program as a whole was effective, how effective the various types of platforms have been, and what different platforms cost to procure and operate. Without such information, it’s impossible to answer whether UAS is the best solution for the Border.

Is \$12,255 a flight hour for a Predator too expensive?

If that’s the true cost, yes it is far too expensive for the mission. For that price, multiple manned aircraft could be employed to provide the same or greater capability.

Your company, MAG, as well as you personally, have started aviation programs for the U.S. Government, Foreign Allies, and for the United Nations. What should a Government Agency be focused on if they are starting an aviation program such as the CBP’s UAS Program?

Any organization starting an aviation program should start with requirements. The requirements — the needs of the organization that aviation is intended to support — will drive the creation of an effective solution. Too many times, organizations start with a

solution (such as selecting a platform first), and then work backwards to figure out what problems it can solve. This is backwards and will lead to ineffective and costly implementation and operations. Measures of Effectiveness (MOE) should also be clearly defined that allow for an objective evaluation of whether the solution is satisfying the original requirements. Central to DHS, OIG, and CBP disagreement on the Border UAS Program is their different understanding of what the program is intended to accomplish.

About Momentum Aviation Group (MAG)

MAG is a global leader in providing and enabling situational awareness to make the world smaller and safer. MAG operate specialized planes, helicopters, and unmanned aircraft worldwide for federal, global, and commercial customers. MAG operates planes

Defense with helicopter training and operations, and is part of the team operating Unmanned Aerial Systems for a United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Africa.

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