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Cleared for Takeoff: Senate Bill Could Pave Way for Use of Drones in Pipeline Operations

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The UAVs for ***Energy Infrastructure Act (S.2684)***, sponsored by Senator Jim Inhofe and introduced on March 15, would allow oil and natural gas pipeline operators to use drones to conduct any activity that manned aircraft already perform. This bill would allow pipeline owners and operators to use unmanned aerial vehicles (or drones) to monitor compliance with existing federal regulations, as well as to respond to emergencies, natural disasters or severe weather events. The Senator reportedly plans to include the bill in the Federal Aviation Administration authorization legislation.

Senator Inhofe explained that, “[e]nergy companies that maintain critical infrastructure, such as pipelines, are required to comply with significant monitoring regulations across thousands of miles of their infrastructure network. This legislation would establish a process to allow companies to use unmanned aircraft to meet monitoring requirements, which can currently be done with manned aircraft, on foot or in vehicles. This legislation also enhances the safety of our energy infrastructure by allowing companies to quickly respond to emergencies and other events with unmanned aircraft to assess on-the-ground conditions without unnecessarily risking human lives.”

If passed, this bill would enable pipeline owners and operators to use drones to more efficiently:

- Monitor pipeline construction, maintenance, and repair, with minimal interruption for employees
- Evaluate internal inspection reports and identify anomalies
- Detect evidence of leaks or other conditions without endangering human lives
- Respond to leaks and other incidents in a timely manner

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