On 6 May in Washington the US Department of Transportation’s Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced a partnership with industry to explore the next steps in unmanned aircraft operations beyond the type of operations the agency proposed in the draft small unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) rule it published in February.

Said US Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx: ‘Government has some of the best and brightest minds in aviation, but we cannot operate in a vacuum. This is a big job, and we will get to our goal of safe, widespread UAS integration more quickly by leveraging the resources and expertise of the industry.’

FAA Administrator Michael Huerta announced the initiative at the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International Unmanned Systems 2015 conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

It is understood that the FAA is working with industry partners on three focus areas, including:

- Visual line-of-sight operations in urban areas
  
  CNN will look at how UAS might be safely used for newsgathering in populated areas.

- Extended visual line-of-sight operations in rural areas
  
  This concept involves UAS flights outside the pilot’s direct vision. UAS manufacturer PrecisionHawk will explore how this might allow greater UAS use for crop monitoring in precision agriculture operations.

- Beyond visual line-of-sight in rural/isolated areas
  
  BNSF Railroad will explore command-and-control challenges of using UAS to inspect rail system infrastructure.

Huerta said: ‘Even as we pursue our current rulemaking effort for small unmanned aircraft, we must continue to actively look for future ways to expand non-recreational UAS uses. This new initiative involving three leading US companies will help us anticipate and address the needs of the evolving UAS industry.’
The three companies reached out to the FAA to work on research continuing to expand use of UAS in the nation’s airspace. CNN and the FAA already have been working together through a Co-operative Research and Development Agreement (CRDA). BNSF has a draft CRDA that is nearly complete and PrecisionHawk has been working with the FAA on a possible research partnership.

Further developing these operational concepts supports the FAA’s overall strategy to expand UAS access, which currently includes rulemaking, reviewing operational data from the six national UAS test sites, expanding commercial operations via the Section 333 exemption process, and issuing operational authorizations for type-certified UAS.

On 23 February this year the FAA published a proposed rule for small UAS and received nearly 4,500 public comments by the end of the comment period on April 24. It has been announced that the agency will work as quickly as possible, but must address all the comments submitted before finalizing the rule. The number and complexity of the comments will play a role in determining the timeline for a final rule.