



August 18, 2015

Mr. Paul Martin, Inspector General
Office of the Inspector General
NASA
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Dear Mr. Martin,

A secret deal recently revealed between NASA and Google to test drones operated by cell phone signals deserves your close scrutiny. For the past year, Google has been testing commercial drone delivery technology in cooperation with NASA under a special waiver originally intended for public agencies. This has given the Internet giant a huge head start and an unfair market advantage over other competitors in developing new commercial delivery systems.

NASA should suspend this special arrangement with Google immediately—before new test runs start over Merced, California, pending an explanation about how this technology benefits taxpayers and the federal government itself. The benefits are currently unclear, and taxpayers have a right to be concerned as this is not the first time that Google has abused taxpayers, advancing commercial technology at their expense.

We ask that you launch an investigation into whether a special relationship between Google and NASA officials led to this unusual arrangement. If NASA is exploring this technology on behalf of other federal agencies, the public has a right to know what exactly is being developed and how it will be applied. NASA should publicly disclose all documents and tell us who will own this technology, Google or the federal government?

Other companies, such as Amazon, have had to test their commercial drone technology outside the US. Amazon is testing its serve at a secret site in Canada after frustration with gaining US permission to test its technology in Washington State. Google should not be allowed to gain dominance over commercial drone technologies because of special treatment from the federal government.

Last week, *The Guardian* revealed details of the joint NASA-Google field tests that allow Google to see whether cell phone signals can be used for automatic air traffic control of drones. The results have big commercial implications for Google's X Lab, and its own wireless phone company.

The 55 pound drones are capable of flying up to 100 mph, and could be made to file flight plans and take direction from computerized air traffic control systems.

The waiver NASA granted Google shielded this information from public view while allowing Google to skip application for an exemption from the more onerous Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) that makes the documentation public. Belatedly, in just the last few weeks, Google has filed for an FAA exemption.

The joint tests are the latest perk NASA has bestowed onto Google as a favored company. Last year, NASA leased Moffett Federal Airfield to a Google subsidiary for 60 years, allowing Google executives to use the field as their private playground when the company should be punished for unethical behavior that you yourself uncovered.

In 2014, your office found that Google Chairman Eric Schmidt and Co-Founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin saved \$5.3 million on jet fuel by buying it at a federal discount for a fleet of corporate jets based at Moffett and owned through a company named H211. The “scientific research” that was to be facilitated via this arrangement turned out to be a fig leaf to justify NASA doing deals with private companies while top Google executives used the jets largely for schmoozing and vacationing. Your audit found that the arrangement “engendered a sense of unfairness and a perception of favoritism toward H211 and its owners.”

Our 2011 report, *Lost in the Cloud: Google and the US Government*, spotlighted the close relationship between Google and the Obama Administration. Those ties have raised serious concerns over special treatment and conflicts of interest not just at NASA, but also the National Security Agency, the General Services Administration, the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, US Patent & Trademark Office, and Federal Communications Commission (FCC). See: <http://insidegoogle.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/GOOGGovfinal012411.pdf>

At the FCC, Google was contracted to monitor visitors to the agency’s website while Google had pending business before the regulator. We need to be sure there are no conflicts of interest in NASA’s support for what appears to be a purely commercial technology. We ask that you either fully disclose all documentation about the joint testing of drones with Google and explain all of its benefits to the taxpaying public, including whether and how it might be adapted for government use, or suspend the program on ethical grounds.

Sincerely,



Liza Tucker
Consumer Advocate