

The Switch

Police drones with Tasers? It could happen in North Dakota.

By [Andrea Peterson](#) August 27

Local police in North Dakota could soon be the first in the country to arm drones with nonlethal weapons, including Tasers and tear gas.

Drones, long known for their military use, have started showing up almost everywhere in recent years — including police departments. Government data shows that their use by local law enforcement is still in its infancy, but drones are increasingly being touted as tools for emergency response and surveillance.

North Dakota's legislature passed a bill in [April](#) originally designed to put limits on police use of drones. For example, the bill requires law enforcement to secure a warrant if they want to use surveillance drones to gather evidence in a criminal investigation. And an early draft of the bill banned equipping drones with *all* weapons.

But that changed when Bruce Burkett of the North Dakota Peace Officers Association successfully pushed an amendment that limited the ban to only lethal weapons, according to [the Daily Beast](#) — leaving law enforcement open to authorize use of nonlethal weapons via drone. That type of weaponry can still cause serious injury or even death: Police stun guns have killed at least 39 people in the United States this year, according to [the Guardian newspaper](#).

State Rep. Rick Becker (R), the bill's sponsor, wasn't happy about the change.

“This is one I’m not in full agreement with. I wish it was any weapon,” he said in a March hearing, according to the Daily Beast. “In my opinion there should be a nice, red line: Drones should not be weaponized. Period.”

North Dakota is really into drones. The state [actively campaigned](#) to be one of the six locations where the Federal Aviation Administration is testing the safety of drones — and [won](#). It's also now the [only FAA-approved site](#) where drones can be tested above 200 feet up in the air or at night.

The University of North Dakota even offers a major in [unmanned aircraft systems operations](#).

And some law enforcement agencies in North Dakota also seem to value their drones. The Grand Forks County Sheriff's Department launched more than 400 drone "operations" from 2009 through 2014, according to FAA data

obtained by [MuckRock](#). That's more than any other law enforcement agency. However, documents obtained from the sheriff's office by [the Daily Beast](#) through an open-records request says that the agency has flown "21 missions" with drones. It's unclear how these two figures square, because neither operations or missions were defined.

And it remains unclear which, if any, North Dakota police departments could decide to start loading up drones with weapons. Meanwhile, civilians have gotten into the armed drone game, too: Last month, a short [Youtube video](#) purported to show a handgun being fired from a home-made drone.

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