THE UNITED STATES NATIONAL DRONE ASSOCIATION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

The USNDA DroneWERX White List

A Warfighter-Centered, Startup-Driven Strategy to Accelerate Drone Innovation and Break Bureaucratic Gridlock

Executive Summary

The U.S. National Drone Association (USNDA) is launching a bold initiative—the DroneWERX White List—to revolutionize how the Department of Defense (DoD) accesses, evaluates, and integrates emerging drone and counter-drone technology. Combining the warfighter-first mission of the USNDA with the transparency and accessibility of a transparent ecosystem, the DroneWERX White List is built to connect operational needs with academic and industry innovations—especially those from non-traditional vendors. The USNDA aims to use competition, experimentation, and transparency to break acquisition gridlock and rapidly fuel the U.S. drone industrial base, and modernize both technology and tactics employed by the nation's warfighters.

Background and Problem Statement

Current DoD acquisition systems for small drones are cumbersome, overly bureaucratic, and structurally biased toward legacy vendors and systems. Current DoD acquisition pathways continue to represent chokepoints for NDAA compliant technology companies. Without real-time operational feedback or battlefield relevance, the stagnant or long-cycle vetting of systems often excludes or delays the most innovative technologies. Meanwhile, American drone companies and service members alike are handcuffed by slow procurement timelines and rigid compliance gates.

The USNDA Approach: A Competitive Counterweight

USNDA's Drone Crucible competitions bring together DoD units, startups, and academic teams in open, objective experimentation environments. These events evaluate drones based on real-world operational performance. In 2025, the Marine Corps and Army Special Operations were among the first to answer the challenge of a field competition at the Drone Crucible, challenging both tactics and emerging technologies. The USNDA's platform is designed to support the warfighter and the innovator. Through the DroneWERX White List, we are extending this model into a scalable, permanent system that allows solutions to rise based on merit, not marketing or lobbying, or which companies have successfully maneuvered through bureaucratic obstacles.

How the DroneWERX White List Works

1. Warfighter-Driven Problem Sourcing: DoD users submit real-world problems through USNDA's trusted communication and relational networks.

2. Open Solution Submissions: U.S.-based startups, academic teams, and companies respond, regardless of technology readiness level.

3. DoD End User Evaluation: Proposed solutions are upvoted and evaluated by service members for prioritization for operational viability.

4. Grant-Based Prototyping: Early-stage ideas receive USNDA and partner-administered grants for classroom-based development or startup acceleration.

5. Drone Crucible Field Testing: Solutions are evaluated in live exercises and competitions.

6. Scaling Support: Startups receive help with NDAA compliance, investment, and supply chain readiness.

7. Acquisition Guidance: Technology providers receive helps navigating the 'last mile' to rapid DoD procurement without creating bottlenecks.

Philosophy: Not a Gate. A Bridge.

The DroneWERX White List is not a traditional down-select or endorsement system. If your solution addresses a real warfighter problem, and you are willing to pursue compliance and scaling—it belongs on the list. There is no 'didn't make the cut.' The goal is access, feedback, and acceleration—not exclusion.

Timeline and Launch

The initial design and architecture of the DroneWERX White List will be developed in partnership with the Special Competitive Studies Project (SCSP) at the AI+ Expo for National Competitiveness, June 2–4, 2025.

A soft launch of the DroneWERX White List will follow during the National Drone Conference in December 2025, with operational pilot programs led by the programs lead DoD partner, U.S. Special Operations Command, and primary academic partner MIT Lincoln Labs.

Conclusion: Let the Warfighter Decide

The USNDA is raising an army of students and startups to wage a drone war on bureaucratic stagnation—for the good of the warfighter. We envision a world where the "valley of death" is no longer a long bureaucratic road of competing paperwork, but a literal valley of death filled with the rusted parts of systems that were proven inadequate to help the military services fight and win our nations wars – tested in competition before failing on the front lines.

By combining transparency, open-source innovation, and real-world evaluation, the DroneWERX White List will provide what the current system cannot: speed, relevance, and access. We don't need another gate. We need a new battlefield for innovation to ensure our nation remains competitive.