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How the Choctaw Nation became an industry leader in drones

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Last month I drove out to the Choctaw reservation to fly drones.

FROM WISE BREAD



There's a ranch the Choctaw tribe purchased in 2013—a 44,616 acre piece of property complete with wild boars, rolling hills, and rocky gravel trails—that they have turned into an epicenter for commercial drone flight trials, and there's a fascinating tale of how it all happened, which I wrote about for *Fortune* in a [piece](#) published this weekend.

More than 20 companies have traveled out to this piece of property to run trials, conduct a proof of concept flight or participate in a drone mission—including Spright, the drone subsidiary of helicopter operator Air Methods. I was there for Spright's first mission on the reservation on April 14.

Eventually, Spright plans to develop a healthcare delivery network that can quickly transport medicine, blood, and medical supplies to rural areas that may be hard to reach via ground. It's one of several potential life-or-death use cases for the technology.

But most of those use cases will be dependent on scalable regulation—at least here in the U.S. Under current rules, a drone needs to be under human eye for the duration of its flight, unless it gets a special certification from the Federal Aviation Administration—which is a time-consuming five-part certification process that only three companies

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Back in 2018, the FAA selected the tribe as one of ten government entities, alongside the Kansas Department of Transportation, Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority, and others to participate in a highly competitive program to study the technology and evaluate safety concerns. It's since been chosen for the FAA's second iteration of that program. James Grimsley, an engineer and former startup founder and academic, who heads up the Choctaw Nation's drone program, has become a leader in the drone industry and sits on the board of the Commercial Drone Alliance, a drone advocacy group, alongside representatives from companies including [Alphabet](#) and [Amazon](#).

The Choctaw Nation is moving forward with a 35-acre construction plan for an Emerging Aviation Technology Center that will include a viewing deck, a space for rapid prototyping and 3D printing, and a gathering room they can use to hold STEM classes, so they can host camps as well as local school teachers who are instructing their students about aviation. Drone delivery company Drone Express is setting up an office in Atoka, Okla. to be closer to the ranch.

For the tribe, their drone efforts have become a source of pride, and also an incredible opportunity for the next generation of tribal members. "This is a business, but it is so much more to us—within our Nation and to our people," Choctaw Chief Gary Batton told me.

Nearly 200 years ago, Choctaws were the first Native Americans moved by the U.S. government onto land in modern-day Oklahoma—a dangerous and disorganized trek now known as the "Trail of Tears" that would take the lives of between one quarter to one-third of the 12,000 Choctaws who made the trip. Since then the Choctaw Nation has become a multi-billion-dollar organization with a private jet and the largest employer in Oklahoma. It manages a rich ecosystem of casinos and hospitality businesses, Chili's and Smashburger franchises, wineries, manufacturing, medical

The Choctaw drone program—what Chief Batton refers to as the tribe’s “startup”—is an important piece of the Nation’s 100-year plan to further diversify its revenue streams and to continue to lift members out of poverty and into the future.

If all goes as planned, it will be Choctaws on the cutting edge of this technology in the years to come. “Just think if our kids could be the leaders in drones,” Chief Batton says. “In 10, 20, 30 years from now: Think if they’re the ones that design the systems that are flying people around—*that* excites me.”

You can read the full feature story [here](#).

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