Most Americans know drones as unmanned, 27-foot-long aircraft the U.S. military uses to monitor borders or to find, photograph and kill terrorists.

But drones of all sizes are fast showing up in other settings, as well. Police in several states have enlisted small, unarmed drones to photograph crime scenes and track suspects. College journalism students have used them to help report droughts. Experts say drones—controlled from the ground and sometimes weighing less than five pounds—soon may routinely fight fires, monitor avalanches, film movies, track wildlife, survey crops, find lost people, detect gas spills, perform safety checks on trains and even deliver medical supplies—or pizzas—across town.

But Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, as they are formally called, raise difficult privacy and safety concerns. Legislatures in at least 39 states have grappled with how to regulate them and where to draw the line between legitimate surveillance and illegal snooping.

In April, Virginia enacted a two-year moratorium on police use of drones, except in emergencies, and Idaho passed a law stating police must get probable-cause warrants before using surveillance drones. Idaho’s law also prohibits anyone from using a drone to photograph private property without the owner’s written permission.

In 2013, NCSL has tracked more than 80 bills and resolutions concerning drones.

Several are similar to Idaho’s law, requiring police to obtain warrants before using drones, says Rich Williams, an NCSL criminal justice policy expert. A Maryland bill, for example, specifies that “a law enforcement agency may not use a drone to gather evidence or other information without a warrant.”

Legislation in Florida waives the warrant requirement if there is “a high risk of a terrorist attack” or “reasonable suspicion that … swift action is needed to prevent imminent danger to life or serious damage to property.” A California measure would prohibit citizens from using drones to spy on people. A similar Arizona bill states it’s “unlawful for a person to use drones to monitor other persons inside their homes or places of worship,” while a New Jersey bill states that anyone with a drone “is guilty of a disorderly person’s offense.”

In addition to police, government and commercial enterprises, backyard hobbyists are building them with model airplanes and cameras, and membership at DIYdrones.com is 39,000 and counting.

Drones are likely to be on lawmakers’ radar for some time. President Obama has ordered that civilian drones be given greater access to U.S. airspace by 2015. Additionally, economic development groups in at least 37 states are competing to land one of six Federal Aviation Administration drone test sites. “Simply put, unmanned aircraft systems are the next big thing in the aerospace industry,” California Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi (D), chairman of the state’s select committee on aerospace, said at a hearing, as reported in the Los Angeles Times.

—Mary Winter
Federal budget cuts—known as the sequester—began March 1. States are feeling the effects of the 9 percent reduction in federal funds for education, human services, housing, homeland security and other programs in FY 2013, which ends Sept. 30. The scope and depth of the cuts vary according to one’s political perspective. Below are examples of reductions from a variety of sources.

- $1.2 trillion
  Federal spending to be cut through FY 2021.
- $3.63 trillion
  U.S. government spending in FY 2012—$2.45 trillion of it raised, $1.18 trillion of it borrowed.
- $85.4 billion
  Spending cut in FY 2013.
- $109 billion
  Spending cut each year from FY 2014 through FY 2021.
- 50-50
  Division of cuts to military and domestic programs, FY 2013 through FY 2021.
- 70,000
  Children to be cut from Head Start early education programs in FY 2013.
- $2.5 billion
  Cut to medical research in FY 2013.
- $2 billion
  Cut to housing rental-assistance programs in FY 2013.
- $30 million
  Cut in the $2.5-billion mental health services budget in FY 2013.
- 11 percent
  Reduction in emergency unemployment compensation benefits in FY 2013.

Sources: Bipartisan Policy Center, Congressional Budget Office, National Conference of State Legislatures, The White House blog.

Watson, the talking computer that captivated the world and won $1 million on the TV game show “Jeopardy!” a couple of years ago, is making history again. This time, it’s in the field of medicine.

Watson is helping physicians at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City diagnose and treat diseases, starting with lung cancer. Over the past year, Watson—developed by IBM and named for company founder Thomas J. Watson—has been programmed with more than 600,000 samples of medical evidence and 2 million pages of oncology research from 42 medical journals and clinical trials, according to IBM. Watson will use the data, representing decades of cancer treatment history, to help determine the best treatment option for each patient.

States no doubt will be monitoring Watson’s ability to increase efficiency in the health-care industry. Medicaid was states’ biggest single expense in fiscal year 2010, consuming more than 22 percent of state budgets. Public hospitals, prison health care and employee health insurance are also costing states more. This new technology is beyond an evolutionary step—it is revolutionary, says Dr. Larry Norton, medical director of Memorial Sloan-Kettering. Watson will serve as a “wise counselor” to physicians—not replacing them, but ensuring they have the best data in making a treatment decision, Norton says. And that can save money.

IBM’s chief medical scientist, Dr. Martin Kohn, puts it this way: Watson will “fill in the gaps of human thought. It doesn’t make the decision—that’s the realm of the clinician and the patient.”

An IBM team programmed Watson with millions of pages of data and the full text of Wikipedia for its appearance on “Jeopardy!” The artificial-intelligence computer delighted audiences by answering questions in English and ultimately outsmarting former champions Brad Rutter and Ken Jennings.

Watson has been compared to the talking computer on the Starship Enterprise, from the popular 1960s TV show “Star Trek.” Indeed, Watson and all those working on its new role at Sloan-Kettering are “boldly going where no man [or machine] has gone before.”

—Laura Tobler
Indoor Tan Bans

States have regulated indoor tanning operations for some years, but the issue made headlines again when a 5-year-old New Jersey girl went to school with a sunburn, and police arrested her mother. The woman, a devotee of tanning salons, was accused of letting her child get too close to a tanning device. A grand jury ultimately chose not to indict “Tan Mom,” as she was called by the tabloids, but this spring, New Jersey raised the age at which a minor can use a commercial tanning bed from 14 to 17. Although exposure to ultraviolet light is fairly consistent across age groups, research indicates teens are more prone to risky behaviors and that blistering sunburns and overexposure during childhood greatly increase the chance of developing skin cancer—specifically melanoma, the deadliest form—later in life.

Thirty-three states place some form of age restrictions on ultraviolet tanning devices. California and Vermont ban their use by anyone under 18. Other state laws combine various restrictions. For example, Delaware, New Hampshire and North Dakota ban the use of indoor tanning by anyone under 14 unless medically necessary, and require parental accompaniment for those 14 to 18. At least 23 states require operators to limit exposure time to manufacturers’ recommendations and/or provide eye protection. Along with requiring parental permission for minors, Arizona also requires public schools to educate students about the risks of developing skin cancer.

Opinions on government tanning restrictions are far from unanimous. In vetoing a measure this April to restrict the use of commercial tanning devices by youths under 18, Maine Governor Paul LePage described it as “government run amok.” He said the measure “tells parents that Augusta knows better than they do when it comes to their children.”

—Karmen Hanson

9-1-1: The Next Generation

Students under gunfire at Virginia Tech sent frantic text messages to 9-1-1, but they were never received. Like most 9-1-1 call centers in 2007, those serving Blacksburg, Va., lacked the technology to read texts. The tragedy, which claimed 32 lives, underscored the need to modernize the 9-1-1 system to support new communication tools, including texts, photos, videos and high-speed Internet. This complex and costly upgrade is now under way.

The Next Generation 9-1-1 will support multi-media from a variety of sources, including laptops, mobile phones, vehicle safety systems, smoke alarms, and even personal medical devices. It also will be able to transfer 9-1-1 calls between call centers during crises.

Tennessee, a leader in the transition to the new system, started building infrastructure in 2009 and expects the price tag to be $44 million over the next five years. Additionally, the system will cost $90 million to install and $16.5 million a year to operate.

The National 9-1-1 Program, run by an emergency services arm of the U.S. Department of Transportation, recently issued a report containing legislative language options in governance, funding, privacy, confidentiality, security and liability to help state lawmakers as they draft policies to address the new 9-1-1 infrastructure. One of the biggest challenges for policymakers remains how to fund the new systems.

Traditional funding for 9-1-1 operations—mostly fees on landline phones—is waning, forcing policymakers to find new sources. With the growth of wireless services, states have already tapped wireless carriers to collect 9-1-1 fees. At least half the states also collect fees on pre-paid cell phones. Some use general fund taxes and state and federal grants to fund 9-1-1.

Several states and associations have explored new 9-1-1 funding models, including North Carolina, which replaced various landline and wireless fees with a single fee for all wired, wireless and computer phone-calling devices. The switch lowered users’ monthly 9-1-1 charges from 70 cents to 60 cents, while still providing sufficient operating revenue.

A federal blue ribbon panel studying 9-1-1 funding on a national scale will release its findings at the end of the year.

—Jo Anne Bourquard

The Melanoma Risk

The number of melanoma cases per 100,000 people in 2009.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

To search NCSL’s database of 9-1-1 legislation, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine