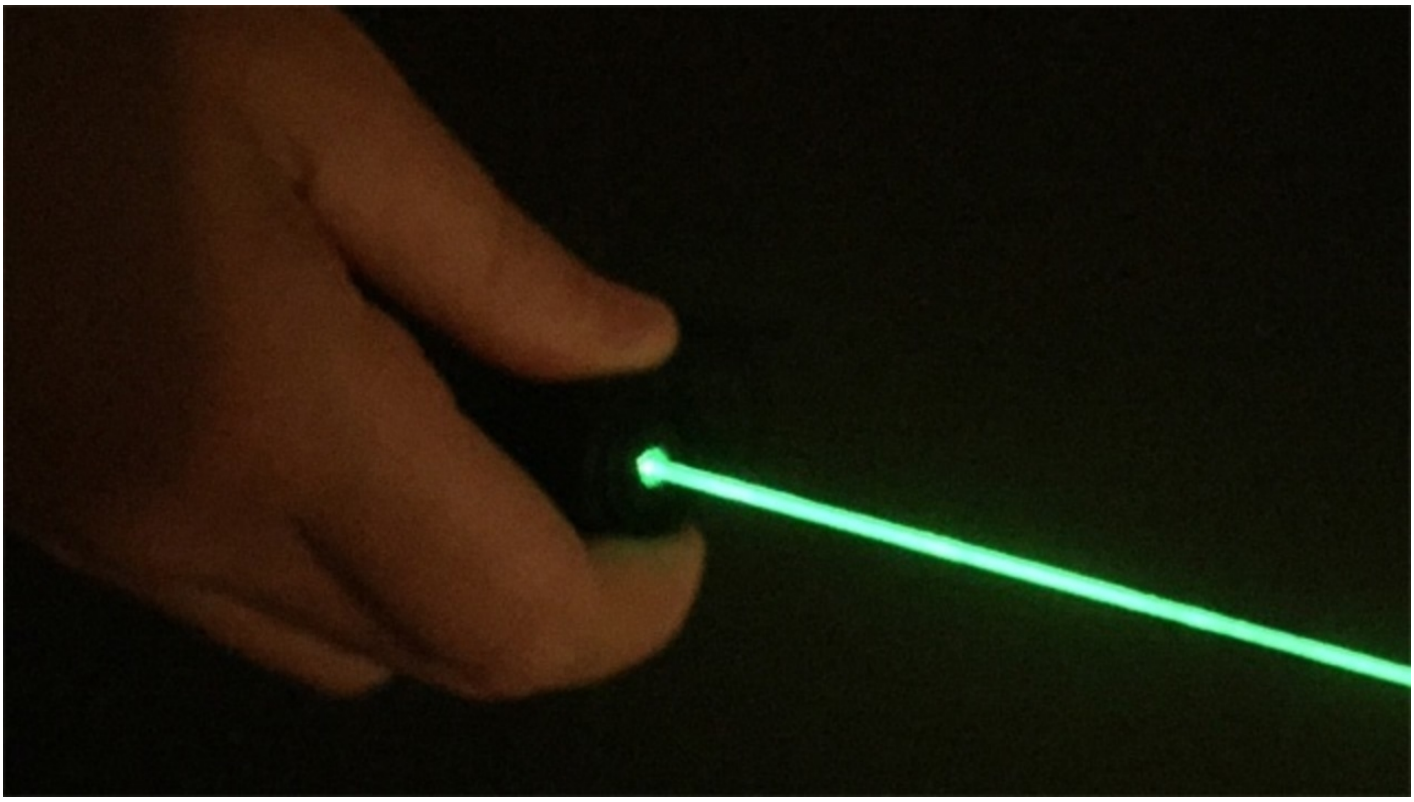
MAN ARRESTED FOR REPEATEDLY POINTING LASER AT NEWS HELICOPTER

News / Events / Festivals



He allegedly pointed a green laser at least four times -- three cases from outside, plus once through an apartment window -- at a TV news helicopter racing to the scene of a New Jersey fire.

And because of that, Stiven Lopez-Bender now faces the prospect of five years in federal prison.

Authorities arrested the 26-year-old on Thursday, a day after a criminal complaint was filed accusing him of aiming a laser pointer at an aircraft, the U.S. Attorney for New Jersey's office announced. Lopez-Bender -- who is set to appear later Thursday in a Newark, New Jersey, federal court -- or his lawyer could not immediately be reached for comment.

If convicted on the charge, he could be jailed as many as five years and be forced to pay as much as a $250,000 fine.

So-called laser attacks have become an increasing problem in the United States, in part because handheld lasers have become more common and affordable. To this point, while there were a mere 283 such strikes, the FAA reported 3,984 in 2014.

That works out to about 10.5 incidents a day. And the rate has only gone up since then, with the FAA reporting 5,352 such strikes for 2015 as of mid-October. On a single day last May, 12

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commercial aircraft got struck by lasers just in New Jersey.

While these attacks have become more common, it's much more rare for someone to be arrested and convicted for carrying them out -- though federal authorities have recently made catching those who do, and ideally dissuading others from doing the same, a priority.

Complaint: Man admitted pointing laser at chopper

The laser attack Lopez-Bender allegedly carried out was one of more than 20 reported on November 11, 2015, alone.

No one on any of these aircraft reported injuries as a result, though the fear is that won't always be the case -- especially if you're talking about people flying in tough conditions, at night or with hundreds of passengers on their aircraft.

Lasers can burn the cornea of a pilot, in some cases sending them to the hospital. The Transportation Security Administration has described them as the "equivalent of a camera flash going off in a pitch black car at night."

The incident allegedly involving Lopez-Bender got a lot of attention in part because of video from CNN affiliate WABC, which showed a conspicuous green laser glaring at the chopper.

The criminal complaint in that case states that a WABC reporter and helicopter pilot were flying about 1,000 feet up toward a fire in Elizabeth, New Jersey, when "a green laser strike was aimed at and struck the flight deck of the helicopter through the main windshield" around 5:20 p.m.

The pair on the chopper subsequently saw a man get out of an SUV, reach inside, "then point a green-color laser at the helicopter, according to the complaint, which identifies Lopez-Bender as the suspect.

As the helicopter got halfway to the ground, it was struck a third time. The complaint claims that Lopez-Bender then went inside a nearby apartment building, from which a fourth laser strike hit the chopper about 10 minutes later.

Law enforcement officers caught up later that day with the suspect, who "admitted that he pointed a green-color laser at the WABC helicopter several times," the complaint states.

Feds push to punish those behind laser attacks

Whether the intent is malicious or not, with President Barack Obama signed a law in 2012 making it a federal crime to aim a laser pointer at an aircraft. Two years later, the FBI launched a new public awareness campaign on the issue and authorized rewards up to $10,000 to track down anyone responsible.

That's happened a few times, including a 2012 guilty plea from a 49-year-old Orlando man who court documents indicate aimed laser beams at passenger aircraft leaving that central Florida city's airport at least 23 times. His action caused pilots to take evasive maneuvers during takeoff and placed the aircraft in danger during a critical time in flight, officials said.

Adam Gardenhire, 19, got 30 months in federal prison for shining a laser pointer at a plane and police helicopter in 2013. The pilot of a corporate jet was hit in the eye multiple times and had vision problems through the next day, according to court documents.

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The next year, a 33-year-old South Carolina man was sentenced to 37 months for aiming a laser pointer "at two news helicopters as they were flying to cover an accident on the interstate," the FBI said.

And in 2015, a 41-year-old man from Portland, Oregon, received a six-month prison sentence (followed by three years of supervised release) for distracting pilots on United and JetBlue flights as they flew over his apartment. According to the FBI, Stephen Bukucs told agents he'd "targeted up to 25 aircraft ... for entertainment and as a 'cat-and-mouse' game."

"Laser pointers are legal and certainly have legitimate uses," George Johnson, a federal air marshal who works with the FBI, said in 2014. "Used in the wrong environment, however, they can be very dangerous."

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