



2020 Tech Leader of the Year Award Nomination: Rob Coatney, Zepher Flight Labs

Rob Coatney already has a storied career here in the Columbia River Gorge, and by all accounts, he is just getting started. Rob is an Aerospace Engineering graduate of the University of Illinois (Champaign/Urbana campus), he has 9 years specific UAV design / build / test experience, and over 25 years designing, building, and flying radio-controlled aircraft in addition to being a licensed Part 107 pilot. In 2015, he joined Zepher after four years at Aeroovel, and in 2019, Zepher Flight Laboratories (ZFL) was created around the UAV improvement concepts Rob had in mind. A sister company to Zepher, ZFL is focused on



innovative advancements in UAS performance and utility from the unique perspective of the modern service member and the military's technology challenges. Rob is one of the founding employees of ZFL, and he is the company's lead aerospace engineer. Armed with a Prime contract to develop a new-generation of Group 2 VTOL UAS, Rob is leading the next wave of technical innovation in the Gorge. This effort has already added multiple new jobs and significant, diversified, outside funding to our region. As this program grows, so will the opportunities and nationwide awareness it brings to our community and our industry. In his spare time, Rob has also designed, developed, and built the [Gooney Bird](#), a UAV specially created to break the VTOL world flight endurance record. Thinking of technology improvements and how our local autonomous industry could utilize such technologies, is exactly how a technology leader should be expected to spend their time and energy. His work, both professionally and personally, has been a significant contribution to solidifying the Gorge's reputation as one of the great unmanned systems hubs in the world.

[Check out this video](#) of Rob's work!