

MEDIA STATEMENT

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SA Civil Aviation Authority issues first “drone” pilot licence

Midrand. The South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA) has issued the first pilot’s licence for remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS). The licence was issued on Friday, 10 July 2015, to Ms Nicole Swart, making her the first person to receive such a licence in South Africa, the continent, and most parts of the world as many countries are still striving to come up with regulations to administer RPAS.

Ms Swart was handed the licence by the Director of Civil Aviation, Ms Poppy Khoza, two weeks after remotely piloted aircraft systems were integrated into the South African civil aviation airspace, following the introduction of relevant regulations on 01 July 2015.

Ms Swart is also a holder of the highest pilot’s licence, which is the Airline Transport Pilot’s Licence (ATPL). When she is not flying remotely piloted aircraft or a traditional manned aircraft, the 23-year-old works as a Testing Standards Officer, Aviation Personnel Standards at the SACAA.

“I am thrilled by the honour to be one of the pioneers in this field; but most importantly I am very happy that I have achieved another goal that I have set myself. It was important for me to get an RPAS pilot’s licence, as I believe technology is advancing rapidly and in the near future this mode of transport will be as common and necessary as cellular phones are in this era. I therefore wanted to ensure that when that time comes, I am already a step ahead. Besides, both licences are crucial in my line of work, as the department in which I work is responsible for upholding testing standards for, among others, pilots,” said Ms Swart.

She said her fascination with the aviation industry started when she was still very young. “When my sister and I were still young, our parents used to travel a lot due to work commitments. I would innocently wish that I could fly to wherever they were when I missed them. That dream got cemented when I boarded an aeroplane the first time at the age of thirteen to go on a holiday. I knew there and then that I wanted to fly aeroplanes,” explained Ms Swart.

According to Ms Khoza, the issuing of the RPAS pilot's licence to Ms Swart augurs well in getting the youth to join the aviation industry, as well as transforming the industry. "We need more young people to join the aviation industry, as there is a shortage of specialist aviation skills across the world. It is also critical that women and historically disadvantaged individuals consider careers in aviation as the current statistics relating to previously disadvantaged persons are still at miniscule levels with pilots, in particular, constituting 8% of total licensed personnel."

According to Khoza this lethargic growth of HDI and women participation is set to continue if meaningful and game-changing interventions are not introduced timeously. "It is encouraging to observe young women such as Nicole breaking barriers in an untransformed and male-dominated environment. We need to help the likes of Nicole to break down barriers by embarking on initiatives that will ensure transformation across all sectors of aviation," she said.

Ms Khoza said that the SACAA was also looking forward to issuing the first RPAS operating licence for commercial activities; adding that the number of applications received for commercial operations was far less than anticipated.

RPAS are aircraft that can fly without a pilot on board and come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. RPAS can be controlled remotely by an individual on the ground or from another aircraft. Traditionally, remotely piloted aircraft systems were used primarily in military operations; however, they can also be used for many other purposes outside of the military. Other uses include conservation efforts, aerial surveillance, scientific research, journalism, and many other commercial and non-commercial activities.

South Africa is one of a handful of countries around the world to have introduced comprehensive regulations to guide RPAS operations.

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About the SACAA:

The South African Civil Aviation Authority ("SACAA") is a juristic body established in terms of the Civil Aviation Act, 2009 (Act No. 13 of 2009) ("the Act"). SACAA is governed and controlled by the Civil Aviation Authority Board ("the Board"). In terms of mandate, the SACAA is tasked with promoting and maintaining a safe, secure and sustainable civil aviation environment, by regulating and overseeing the functioning and development of the industry in an efficient, cost-effective, and customer-friendly manner according to international standards.

For more information contact:

Phindiwe Gwebu

Executive: Corporate Services

Tel: + 27 11 545 1086

Cell: + 27 83 461 6070

Email: gwebup@caa.co.za

Website: www.caa.co.za