

MEDIA STATEMENT

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Drastic increase in the number of drones in RSA

Drone operators urged to abide by applicable laws

[Johannesburg] A review of the South African Aircraft Register over a 12-month period shows a dramatic increase in the number of registered remotely piloted aircraft systems, commonly known as drones, from 216 in January 2016, to 465 in January 2017.

Similarly, a comparison of statistics between January 2016 and January 2017 indicates an increase in the number of remote pilot's licences issued, i.e. from 33 in the previous year to 368 in 2017.

“The substantial increase in the number of registered RPAS and associated licences in the country is not a surprise at all. In fact, the increase has always been envisaged as the rapid advancement of this technology and its potential use in commercial and other activities make RPAS appealing to many prospective operators. However, the low cost and easy availability of RPAS mean that anyone can acquire and utilise these aircraft; and therein lies the concern, as some owners may use these aircraft in a manner that contravenes civil aviation regulations and other laws,” explained Simon Segwabe, Executive: Aviation Safety Operations at the South African Civil Aviation Authority (SACAA).

Remotely piloted aircraft systems are categorised as aircraft across the globe; hence authorities are eager to swiftly integrate these aircraft into the existing manned aviation sector and civil airspace, which is relatively safe, secure, and highly organised.

“The main concern for regulators such as the SACAA is the increasing number of unregistered and unapproved RPAS operations that are taking to the skies illegally and are being potentially operated by unlicensed individuals. It is estimated that for every registered and licensed remotely piloted aircraft taking to the skies, there are two or three more doing so illegally,” Segwabe asserted.

According to Segwabe there are many RPAS enthusiasts and entrepreneurs who have none or limited knowledge of the aviation industry, and thus remain oblivious to the serious risks that they pose to other airspace users by not abiding by the applicable civil aviation regulations.

“The reality is that in most instances RPAS are made with consumer-grade electronics, with uncertified and often untraceable hardware and software. The failure rates of some of these aircraft are indeterminable, as there are currently no civil certification standards available anywhere in the world. Although these aircraft are much smaller and lighter than existing manned aircraft, their presence in the skies still present a significant risk to other airspace users, persons, and property on the ground. A collision of an RPAS and a helicopter or a jet full of passengers could lead to a catastrophic disaster.”

Increase in reports of invasion of privacy

The SACAA is urging RPAS owners and operators to familiarise themselves with the applicable civil aviation regulations, as well as other laws enforceable by other State entities.

“The increasing number of reported incidents of RPAS flying into other people’s properties without permission, or following individuals around, is of concern. We urge RPAS owners and operators to respect the privacy of others.”

Hefty fines for failure to abide by the rules

RPAS operators who fail to adhere to civil aviation regulations could receive a 10-year prison sentence or a fine of R50 000, or both. Individuals that use RPAS in an irresponsible manner may also face legal liability for breaking laws enforceable by other government agencies.

According to civil aviation regulations, no remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) shall be operated, unless such an RPA is registered with the SACAA and has been issued with a letter of approval. No person shall operate an RPAS unless that person has been issued with a valid remote pilot’s licence.

Regulations prohibit the flying of an RPA directly overhead any person or group of people, or within a lateral distance of 50 metres from any person, structure or building. An RPA may not be flown into any property without the permission of the property owner.

The SACAA urges RPAS pilots to adhere to all the limitations and restrictions as outlined in the regulations, notably that:

- an RPA should always be in a fit-to-fly condition with the relevant authorisation to fly;
- the aircraft is not flown in a formation or swarm;
- the aircraft is not flown 400 feet above the surface or within a radius of 10 kilometres from an airport;
- the aircraft is not flown adjacent to or above a nuclear power plant, prison, police station, crime scene, court of law, national key point or strategic installation.

“The SACAA remains excited about the immense benefits and prospects offered by this technology, and hence we are working on initiatives that will foster more RPAS innovation and rapid integration into the South African airspace. However, we appeal to all stakeholders, including retailers, to make a concerted effort to adhere to all the applicable laws,” Segwabe concluded.

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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"). The SACAA is self-funded and reports to the Department of Transport. It 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.

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