

A drone present may come wrapped in red tape

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If you give or receive a drone for the holidays this year, you should know that it may come with a bit of red tape.

The Federal Aviation Administration is considering new rules that would require owners of the unmanned flying vehicles to register with the agency. At least as it's being discussed, the process would be fairly easy; users would simply have to provide their name and address and potentially acknowledge that they've read through some safety guidelines.

But the step could have negative consequences for [drone](#) owners. Owners could be fined if they don't register. Also, the registration information could be used to track down operators in the case of an accident.

And the new requirement could be the first of a series of rules governing drone use. In a law passed three years ago, Congress mandated that the FAA figure out how to integrate drones into the airspace used by private planes and commercial airliners. The FAA has already proposed a series of other rules that would govern when, where and how consumers could fly the unmanned vehicles.

The registration requirement, which the FAA hopes to put in place by the end of the year, would apply to all drones that weigh more than half a pound. That would leave out the smallest and least expensive ones, including the minidrones from Parrot that cost less than \$150.

But the new rules would apply to many other models that are marketed at consumers, including Parrot's Bebop, 3D Robotics' Solo and DJI's Phantom 3. And if you happened to get a drone in the past, you can't escape from the new rules; the registration requirements would apply to you, too.

The registration requirement has been put on a fast-track by federal regulators. It was only in late October that the U.S. Department of Transportation and the FAA announced that they were putting together a task force to study the issue. The task force submitted its report and recommendations earlier this month.

The regulators' haste has a lot to do with the quickly growing popularity of drones. Manufacturers will ship some 1.1 million unmanned flying devices next year, up from 700,000 this year and 400,000 in 2014, estimates the Consumer Technology Association, the electronics industry's trade group. The CTA expects them to be a hot gift item, with as many as 400,000 shipped during this holiday season alone.

The overall push for new rules to govern drones comes out of a concern for safety. A drone that fell out of the sky could potentially kill someone. One that was flown near or into a plane could cause a crash that could kill or injure hundreds. An errant drone could damage buildings, cars or other property or disrupt road traffic.

And these aren't just theoretical concerns. The FAA has seen a sharp rise in the number of pilots reporting possible drone encounters while they are flying. Meanwhile, there have been reports that drones flown near some wildfires here in California have hindered efforts to contain them by making it dangerous for firefighters to fly air tankers over the blazes.

And this summer, tennis fans watching the U.S. Open in New York were alarmed when a consumer drone crash-landed in the stadium during a

match. Fortunately, the area where it crashed was empty, and no one was hurt.

Industry advocates are worried that regulations could stymie a nascent industry. Who would want to own a drone - much less fly one - if you have to worry about adhering to a bunch of rules?

But at least right now, the industry seems to have the opposite problem: too few rules. Drones under 55 pounds are basically unregulated. Even if the new registration requirement is put in place, it would represent only the mildest of strictures.

At least as proposed by the [task force](#), the rules would only require that users register with their name and street address. They wouldn't have to give any other contact information, such as their phone number or email address. The rules also wouldn't require users to register their drones individually. And while they'd have to acknowledge that they'd seen the FAA's guidelines on safe flying, they wouldn't have to take any kind of safety course.

And it's possible that consumers could get away without ever registering their drones. Instead of requiring stores to register drones with the FAA when they sell them to consumers, the new rules would simply ask consumers to register them after they purchase them, online. Given how few consumers do things like register their pets or their electronics products - even when it's required by law or to get warranty coverage - I'm not optimistic that consumers are going to rush out and register their drones.

Still, regulators believe the new registration requirement will encourage consumers to fly the [unmanned vehicles](#) responsibly and to be accountable if things go wrong. And they could lay the foundation for additional rules in the future.

A drone could make a great holiday gift. Just know that to fly it you may soon have to worry about a lot more than how to use a remote control or the prevailing wind conditions.

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