

New rules on small drones kick in: What you need to know

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For companies that want to use small drones, a new era began Monday.

That's when rules kicked in that free them from having to request special permission from the federal government for any commercial drone endeavor - a waiver process that often took months.

Although industry experts say the Federal Aviation Administration's new rules on commercial drones largely make it easier for companies to use the unmanned aerial vehicles, there are still a lot of constraints.

Here's what you need to know.

WHAT DO THE RULES SAY?

Under the new commercial-drone rules, operators must keep their drones within visual line of sight - that is, the person flying the drone must be able to see it with the naked eye - and can fly only during the day, though twilight flying is permitted if the drone has anti-collision lights. Drones cannot fly over people who are not directly participating in the operation or go higher than 400 feet above the ground. The maximum speed is 100 mph.

Drones can carry packages as long as the combined weight of the drone and the load is less than 55 pounds.

Before Monday, people needed a pilot's license to fly a commercial

drone. Under the new rules, people over age 16 can take an aeronautical knowledge test at an FAA-approved facility and pass a background check to qualify for a remote pilot certificate.

WHAT IF COMPANIES HAVE PLANS THAT WOULD BREAK THOSE RULES?

Businesses can apply for a waiver of most of the operational restrictions as long as they can prove their proposal will be safe.

The FAA has already approved 76 such waivers, most of which involve commercial operations at night, FAA Administrator Michael Huerta told reporters Monday.

The new set of rules "just standardizes the exemption process and lowers the barrier to entry," said Arthur Holland Michel, co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College.

But, he said, the new waiver process will probably help regulators understand how companies want to use drones beyond these initial, limited regulations. That could one day lead to rules for more complex drone operations, such as those proposed by Amazon or Google.

WHAT TYPES OF INDUSTRIES WILL BENEFIT MOST FROM THESE RULES?

Real estate, aerial photography, construction and other industries that want to use drones for basic functions, such as taking a few photos or videos of a property, probably will benefit the most because their plans align more closely with the regulations, industry experts said.

But companies with more ambitious or capital-intensive plans, such as oil and gas firms that want to investigate pipelines, or farmers that want

to look at large fields, will largely be limited by restrictions such as the visual line-of-sight rule. Even security companies that want to have drones patrol after dark will need to apply for a waiver if they want to operate.

WHAT ABOUT DRONE DELIVERY COMPANIES?

Although the new rules allow drones to carry loads, the visual line-of-sight rule and the weight restriction will keep more ambitious companies with plans for long-distance travel, such as Amazon, from making significant deliveries that way.

WILL THESE RULES LEAD TO A HUGE INCREASE IN COMMERCIAL USE OF DRONES?

The FAA thinks it might. The agency has predicted there could be as many as 600,000 drones used for commercial operations during the next year. As of Friday, it said, there were only 18,940 registered for commercial purposes.

But it's hard to tell because the industry is so new, Holland Michel said.

The elimination of the pilot's license requirement lowers the barrier to entry - operators just need to get their remote pilot certificate and register their drone - but it's not clear whether users will think it's worthwhile to invest in drone operations with the current restrictions, he said.

Gretchen West, senior advisor at law firm Hogan Lovells and co-executive director of the Commercial Drone Alliance advocacy group, said she expects to see an uptick in use once the rules take effect.

But regulations are only one obstacle to wider adoption of commercial

drones, she said. Many enterprise companies are averse to risk, and issues surrounding privacy and public perception still need to be addressed.

"There's still a lot of challenges we have to overcome as an industry to prove the value of [drones](#), even outside the regulatory environment," West said.

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