

UK to tighten rules on drones after near-misses with planes

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In this Feb. 25, 2017 file photo, a drone flies in Hanworth Park in west London, as a British Airways 747 plane in the background prepares to land at Heathrow Airport. British officials announced plans Saturday, July 22, 2017 to further regulate drone use in a bid to prevent accidents and threats to commercial aviation. (John Stillwell/PA via AP, File)

British officials announced plans Saturday to further regulate drone use in a bid to prevent accidents and threats to commercial aviation.

The new rules will require drones that weigh eight ounces (226.79

grams) or more to be registered and users will have to pass a safety awareness exam.

The government acted because of concerns that a midair collision between a drone and an aircraft could cause a major disaster. Pilots have reported numerous near-misses in the last year alone in Britain. Earlier this month London's Gatwick Airport briefly closed its runway over safety concerns when a drone was spotted in the area and several planes had to be diverted.

The British Airline Pilots Association said independent tests show even a small drone could cause severe damage to a helicopter or an airline windscreen. The union's general secretary, Brian Strutton, said pilots "have been warning about the rise in the number of cases of drones being flown irresponsibly close to aircraft and airports for some time."

He said a new report "clearly shows that readily available drones which can be flown by anyone can shatter or go straight through an aircraft windshield or shatter a helicopter rotor. And those impacts would have catastrophic consequences."

British police have also reported a sharp rise in complaints from the public about intrusive drone use.

Aviation Minister Martin Callanan said drones are providing many useful services but that the new regulations are need to prevent the technology from being misused.

"Our measures prioritize protecting the public while maximizing the full potential of drones," he said.

The new rules will make it easier for the government to track drones that have been flown in an allegedly risky manner or that infringed on

protected airspace. Details of the registration plan haven't yet been worked out.

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