

An aerial photograph of a waterfront area, likely in Portland, Oregon. The image shows a marina with several boats docked, a large building with a flat roof, and a highway with traffic. The scene is captured during the golden hour, with warm sunlight creating long shadows and a soft glow. A blue semi-transparent rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title text.

# THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO LAUNCHING COMMERCIAL DRONE OPERATIONS



From agriculture to telecommunications and from industrial construction to film production, we're seeing major corporations, small businesses, and individuals using drones to save time, improve safety, and run efficiently.

In some countries, such as Japan, drones have been used commercially for at least 15 years. But in other countries, such as the United States, where commercial drones are still on the verge of launching, business leaders and executives may feel as if they're starting from scratch. First-time entrepreneurs have the added challenge of handling all the logistics of starting a new business.

Setting up a highly professional, low-risk commercial drone operation requires serious consideration and advance planning:

- **Which aircraft will you invest in?**
- **How will you train and manage your pilots, and ensure that they fly safely?**
- **How will you meet regulatory requirements in your jurisdiction?**
- **Is your operating process efficient? Will it scale as you grow?**
- **Will you be able to meet customers' expectations and turn a profit?**
- **Do you already have the foundational elements of an aviation business (such as general operating manual & operational checklists), or will you need to create them?**

## At Skyward, we've seen what works and what doesn't

Companies in more than 30 countries are turning to Skyward for advice on launching and scaling their commercial drone programs, and more established businesses are using the Skyward platform to manage safe, efficient ops and meet business and regulatory requirements.

Every business is different and the industry is changing quickly. But, based on our own experiences as commercial UAV operators as

well as helping clients in numerous jurisdictions, every successful operation has certain traits in common:

- 1.** They understand regulatory requirements
- 2.** They use the right drones for the job
- 3.** They have insurance
- 4.** They have efficient processes that enable them to scale as they grow
- 5.** They put safety first
- 6.** They plan and log flights
- 7.** They employ or contract with experienced pilots and provide ongoing training

# 1. Know the Regulations & Get the Necessary Authorizations

Your country's airspace regulations provide the essential rules for your commercial drone operation. Many countries have regulations specific to commercial drones.

Other countries, such as the U.S., are still working them out.

No matter where you are, there are airspace regulations and it is every pilot's responsibility to understand and follow them. This is for good reason: Every airspace rule is based on safety, which has made airspace one of the most regulated and safest spaces accessible to humans.

Just as in many other industries (banking, transportation, telecommunications), commercial drone operators in most countries need authorization from a regulator in order to do business.

Those in Canada need a Special Flight Rules Operating Certificate from Transport Canada.

In the U.S., businesses that want to fly commercially currently must have a 333 Exemption from the FAA. At some point in 2016, the FAA plans on finalizing regulations for commercial drones, and companies will no longer need a 333 Exemption.

Applying for a 333 isn't straightforward, and the FAA has come under a certain amount of criticism for this. But operating within the law is essential for any legitimate enterprise. Every airspace regulation is focused on safety, and your drone operation should be too.

It's your responsibility to know the regulations of every country you do business in and operate safely.

## **KEEP IN MIND :**

Your province/state, county, and city may have additional regulations for UAVs.



**Special Flight Operations  
Certificate Application**

Skyward IO, Inc.  
Version 1.0

June 10, 2015



To support our customers' compliance efforts, Skyward provides free 333 Exemption applications for the FAA and SFOC applications for Transport Canada.

# 2. Choose the Right Drone for the Job

The purpose and the payload—often the combination of a camera and lens—should determine the aircraft that you use. For film and television, payload requirements are often set by the director of photography, but in other industries, there may be more flexibility.

## KEEP IN MIND :

Depending on your industry and customers, **drones may not always be the best option**. Sometimes, helicopters and planes are the most appropriate choice for the job. In other cases, a custom drone can be manufactured to purpose.

In general:

- **Rotorcraft** carry heavier payloads and tend to be used for limited geographical areas.
- **Fixed-wing aircraft** tend to be used for projects that require higher altitude or surveying large areas.

It's important to invest in the best aircraft for the job. But for the professional operator, the equipment and software you need to deliver the end product to your clients is even more important. Customers care much more about the product you deliver than the tools you use.

## Ongoing maintenance

Every UAV requires ongoing maintenance. This includes physical maintenance such as blade replacements and routine services inspections, as well as firmware updates. Batteries also require periodic checks and firmware updates. Your operations platform should make it easy for you to schedule and manage ongoing maintenance.





Before investing in aircraft, use these criteria to evaluate your options:

**Job-specific applications**

- How will you be using UAVs?
- What jobs will you be performing?
- What data will be collected?
- What software will you need to collect it?

**Time and distance**

- How far do you need your UAVs to fly and for how long?

**Payload capacity**

- How much weight will your UAVs need to carry?

**Cost**

- How much can you afford to spend on your fleet? Remember to factor in costs of hiring and training pilots.

**Business requirements**

- What level of ongoing support would you like a UAV manufacturer to provide?
- Does the manufacturer use validated airspace data?
- Does the ground control station integrate with your operations management systems? Or will you have to reenter flight data?

# 3. Get Insured

UAV insurance covers physical damage of drones and liability arising from the operation of drones. Certain regulators, [such as Transport Canada](#), require all commercial UAV operators to carry liability insurance at the minimum.

Even if your airspace regulator doesn't require UAV insurance, it's likely that your customers will before they hire you.

UAV insurance enables you to:

- **Operate professionally**
- **Safeguard your investment & your assets**
- **Protect against liability**
- **Meet investor/shareholder requirements**
- **Mitigate risks**
- **Provide the best service to your clients or customers**

## Insurance is a sign that you're a UAV professional

Getting UAV insurance may seem like a hassle, but for most companies, it's simply a part of doing business.

If you hire a contractor to work on your house, or a trucking company to transport freight, or a surgeon to replace your knee, you expect that these individuals or companies have insurance. If they didn't, it would be a red flag that they may not be qualified to do the job. Even restaurants and retail stores have insurance.

It's reasonable for customers and clients to expect any service provider to have insurance.



## How much is enough?

The amount of coverage that you need depends on your business, your customers, and your assets.

Currently, insurance providers are insuring commercial drone companies for up to \$500 million in liability and up to \$10 million in hull damage.

UAV insurers offer the highest coverage to the most professional operations. Businesses that can't prove consistent, safe, well-tested operating procedures, policies, and controls aren't eligible for as much coverage.

### TIP:

When looking for drone insurance, make sure your provider offers a broad range of coverage so that you can purchase just what you need now and can add more as you grow.

## Cost of Commercial UAV Insurance Coverage

According to industry experts, rates currently range from about \$900 per drone per year on the low end to \$10,000 per drone per year on the high end. Your rates will depend on your situation.

An insurance company determines your rates—and the amount of coverage you can purchase—by a number of factors, including:

- **The processes & systems you use to manage your drones & pilots**
- **Operating procedures & standards**
- **Documented training**
- **Preflight & safety checklists**
- **Proof of maintenance**

Companies that can prove high standards for training, operations, and management will qualify for more coverage at better rates.



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Before you apply for insurance, see the steps you can take to qualify for more coverage at better rates.

[Download our checklist:](#)



# 4. Set Your Process (& Keep Refining It)

If you work for a major enterprise, your company may already have business processes that can be applied to your UAV operations.

If not, or if you're running a small business, the importance of having an efficient, scalable process can't be overstated.

We've all experienced the frustration, poor service, and lack of professionalism that happens when a business doesn't have a good process—the electrician shows up late or not at all, somebody else's food arrives at your table, your package gets shipped to Omaha instead of Houston, your Internet connection is spotty at best.

Your clients deserve better, whether they're external customers or colleagues within your company.

## REMEMBER:

The best processes increase efficiency, lower costs, mitigate risks, enable good customer service, empower your crew to do their best work without wasting time, and scale to meet increasing demand.

When we conduct commercial flights at Skyward under our 333 Exemption, we follow a five-phase process.

## 1 Job engagement

### Understand the customer's requirements.

This is all about asking the right questions and communicating well. Taking the time to understand your customer's expectations at the outset will save you time and money and enable you to provide the best service—even if it means declining the job. Your customer is anyone requesting your UAV services, including a colleague within your company.

- What is the final product that your customer expects?
- When does your customer expect it?
- What is your customer's budget for the job?

### Then, analyze the customer's requirements. Are you able to meet them?

- Is the job legal?
- Using a validated drone airspace map, check to see whether the job is within controlled or restricted airspace where you may need special permission to fly.

- Do you have the aircraft and skills to perform the job?
- Do you have the permits, licenses, and insurance needed to perform the job?
- Do you and your crew have the time? Are your schedules full?
- Is the budget reasonable? Or would you lose money if you were to undertake it?
- Is there a more cost-effective way of achieving the same result?

If you have the time, availability, crew, aircraft, insurance, permission, and expertise to undertake the job, you're read to start planning.

## 2 Operations planning

Once you have a clear understanding of your customer's expectations and you've determined that you have the time and resources to complete the job, it's time to plan. More than any other, this step will ensure that your crew operates as efficiently as possible.

## Evaluate airspace

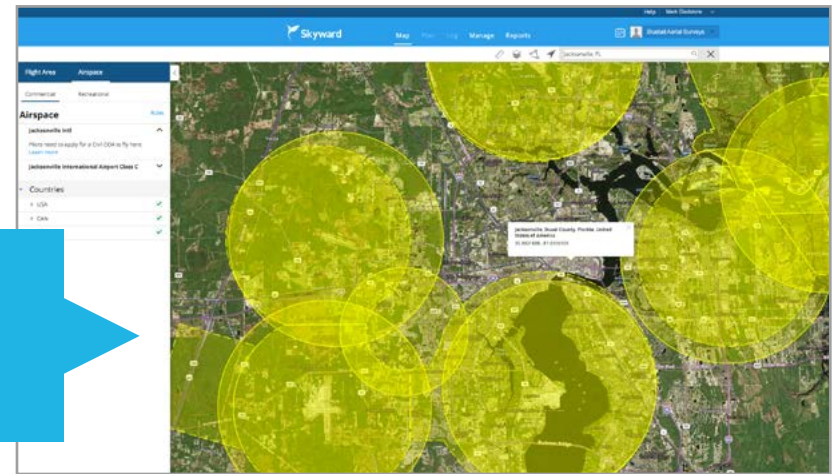
Using a validated drone airspace map, take a look at the location of the job. During the job engagement phase, you determined the type of airspace in which you'll need to fly to complete the job.

For example, if the job is in the United States within an airport coordination zone (depicted by the yellow circles in the Skyward Airspace Map), you'll need to apply for a Civil COA from the Federal Aviation Administration's website. But if the job is in an airport coordination zone in Canada, you may be able to fly there under the terms of your Special Flight Rules Operating Certificate (SFOC).

If the job requires that you fly over private property, you may be required to get permission from landowners before flying. This is always a good idea, but check your operating license or certificate for specifics.

If your job requires special permission from a regulator or landowner, this will affect your scheduling.

*The Skyward Airspace Map simplifies airspace regulations so UAV pilots can quickly see where they're clear to fly and where they may need special permission.*







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## Why the Skyward Airspace Map Is Different

At Skyward, we believe that safety is #1 for all aircraft, including UAVs. That's why our team of airspace analysts inspects every piece of airspace data we receive from regulators. This allows us to correct errors and alert the regulator so that they can be corrected.

Then, we simplify the airspace to make it relevant and easy to understand for commercial drone operators.

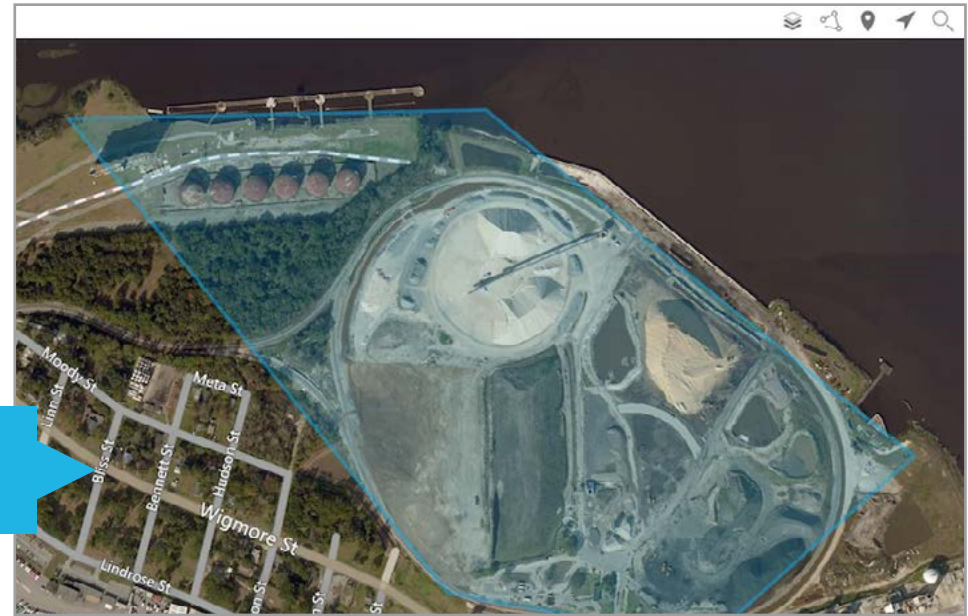
**Safe airspace benefits all of us.**

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## Create a flight area

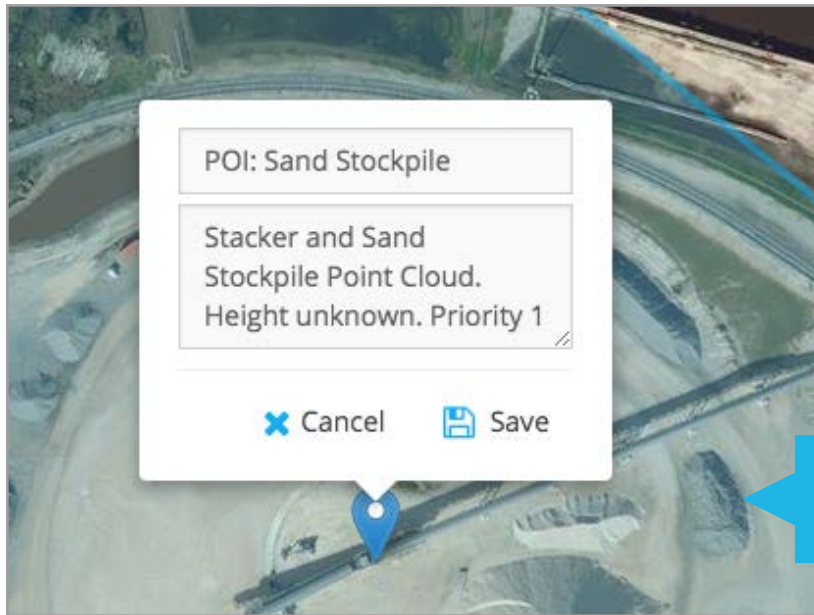
Depending on the scope of the flight job, your flight area may be very large (eg, a wildlife survey) or highly constrained (eg, inspecting a cellular tower). Regardless, the area should encompass your crew's rally point and takeoff and landing areas.

*The Skyward Airspace Map allows you to create and share flight areas with your crew so they can see exactly where they need to go.*



## Mark points of interest

Your crew needs to know exactly what's expected of them, including rally points, potential takeoff areas, where they need to fly, when, and the type of data they need to collect. Mark points of interest and record these details so your crew can see everything in advance and avoid guesswork once they're in the field.



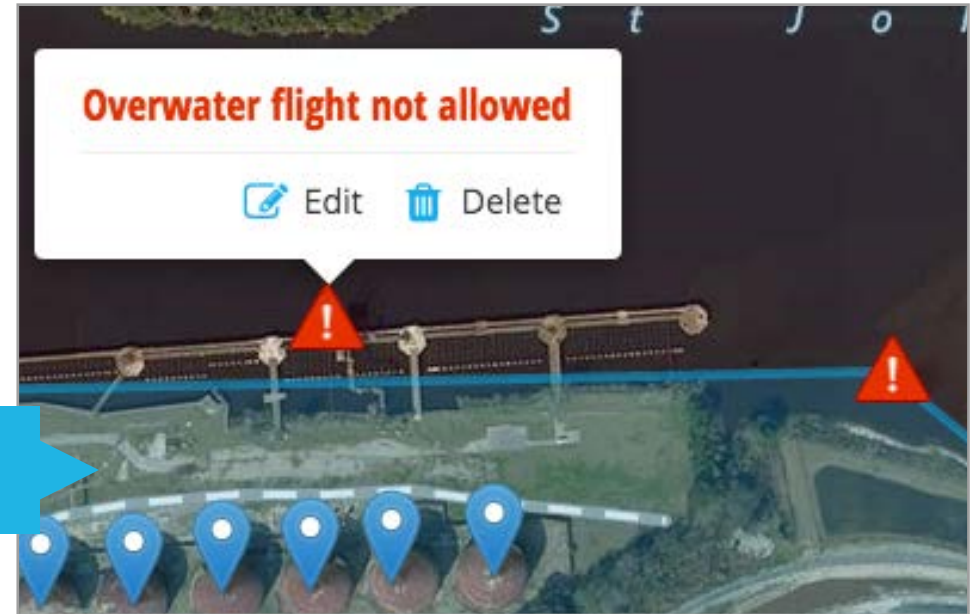
*Points of interest marked on the Skyward Airspace Map*



## Mark hazards

Show your crew potential hazard areas, such as powerlines, roads, high-traffic pedestrian areas that may need to be blocked off, or structures that are higher than your permit allows you to fly.

*Points of interest and hazards marked within a flight area on the Skyward Airspace Map*



## Coordinate with your field crew and schedule the job

Share the flight plan with your crew and make sure that everything makes sense to them. Check your field crew's availability, and remember to factor in extra time if you need to obtain special permission from a regulator or landowner.

*Share your finished flight plan with your crew and other stakeholders.*



### Other scheduling considerations:

- Make sure your UAVs and batteries are available and airworthy.
- Make sure that your available pilot-in-command has been trained to fly the UAV scheduled for the job.
- Do you have enough batteries for the planned flight duration?
- Do you need to block off public access?
- Does your client require that you have an escort or supervision?
- Depending on the time of year and weather in your area, you may need to add a buffer to your schedule to account for weather-related delays.

### Confirm with your customer

Send your customer screenshots of your flight plan and confirm that all the details have been accounted for.

## 3 Execution

On the day of the flight, check your validated drone airspace map again. Temporary flight restrictions can happen at any time—for example, if there is a forest fire or public emergency, or if the president comes to town.

There may be a way to work with regulators even in the event of a temporary flight restriction, but don't settle for verbal approval—insist on getting it in writing.

Also, take a look at the weather. If it's raining, snowing, foggy, or very cold, you may have to reschedule for another day.

### Once on-site:

- Check the weather, including temperature and windspeed.
- Are there non-participants in the area?
- Are there structures that are higher than you are allowed to fly?
- Begin your preflight checklist.

# Operating Manual

## Table of Contents

### List of Tables

- 1 Introduction
  - 1.1 Versioning . . . . .
  - 1.2 Organization . . . . .
  - 1.3 Contact Information . . . . .
  - 1.4 Regulatory Framework . . . . .

- 2 Flight Operations
  - 2.1 Definitions & Acronyms . . . . .
  - 2.2 Skyward Categories . . . . .
  - 2.3 Operational Requirements . . . . .
  - 2.4 Area of Operations . . . . .
  - 2.5 Scheduling and Notifications . . . . .
  - 2.6 Safety of Non-participating Aircraft . . . . .
  - 2.7 Crew Readiness . . . . .
  - 2.8 Aerial Robotic System . . . . .
  - 2.9 DJI Spreading Wing . . . . .
  - 2.10 3DR X8 . . . . .
  - 2.11 3DR Iris . . . . .
  - 2.12 DJI Phantom 2 . . . . .
  - 2.13 DJI Phantom 2 Vision . . . . .
  - 2.14 DJI Inspire 1 . . . . .
  - 2.15 Parrot Bebop . . . . .

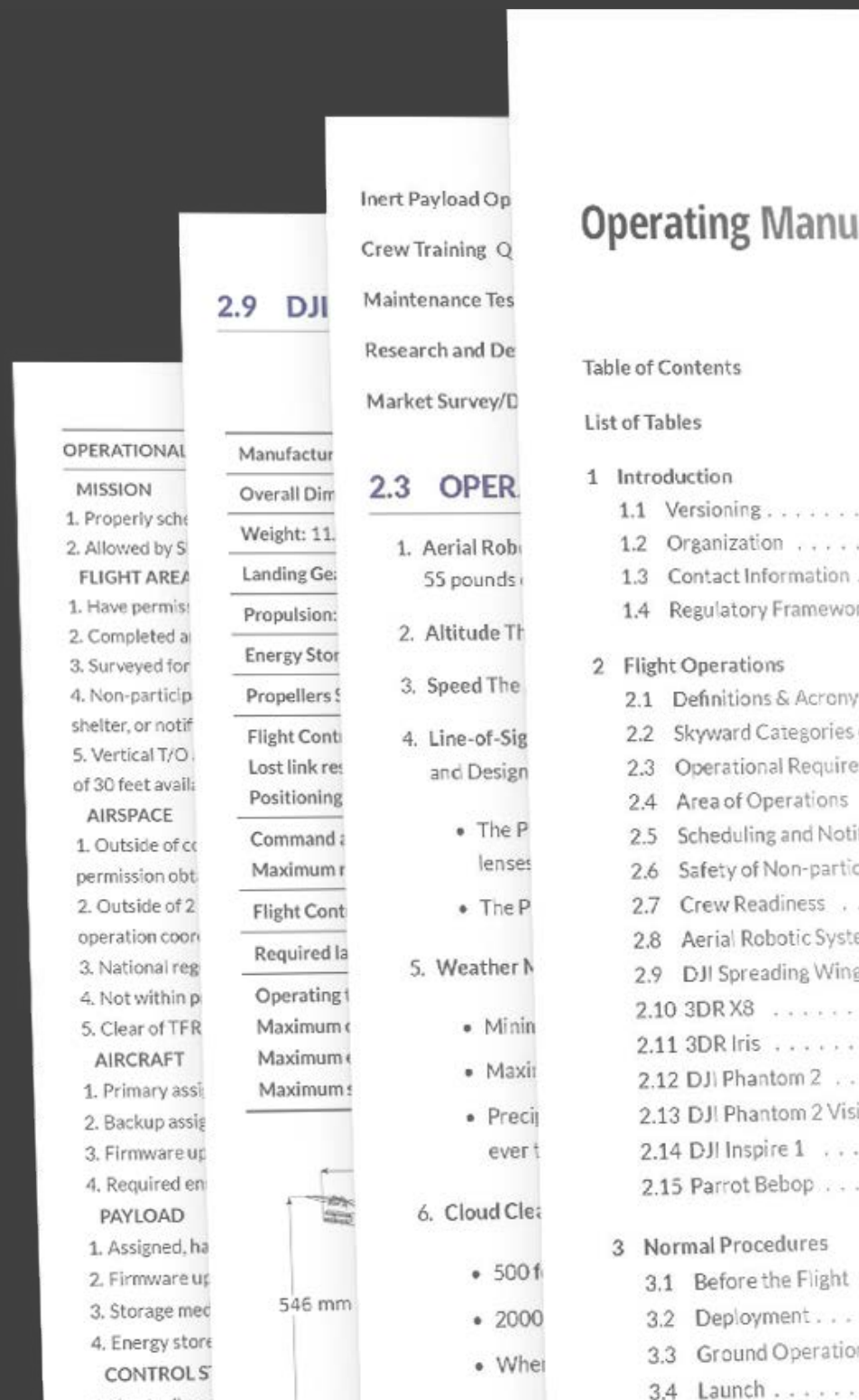
- 3 Normal Procedures
  - 3.1 Before the Flight . . . . .
  - 3.2 Deployment . . . . .
  - 3.3 Ground Operations . . . . .
  - 3.4 Launch . . . . .

# Aviation Runs on Checklists

For more than a century, aviation has run on checklists, including preflight, in-flight, postflight, and emergency checklists. Checklists remove variables and lower risks by ensuring that complex processes and procedures are carried out the same way every time.

At Skyward, we've developed our own General Operating Manual and Operational Checklists in collaboration with aviators, UAV experts, regulators, and insurance providers.

## Learn more about how Skyward can support your operations.





## 4 Close Out

As soon as the crew finishes the job, they should log the flight. In general, flight logging involves two types of data, which should be reflected in your system of record: 1. what the human beings did and 2. what the aircraft did.

All aviators log flights in order to maintain pilot credentials, track training requirements, and be prepared for regulatory audits—airspace authorities routinely review pilot logbooks.

For all pilots, flight hours are the major benchmark of professionalism and credibility and they can only be tracked by logging flights.

Training programs and maintenance requirements also need the support of flight logging data. You'll also need to know how long an aircraft has been flown in order to schedule routine maintenance.

In terms of your business, UAVs represent a major investment. But they only provide return value if they're being used. Logging flights will show you whether you're maximizing your investment.

### Flight logging is essential for:

- Meeting regulatory requirements
- Determining whether the aircraft is due for maintenance
- Keeping a record of unexpected incidents, such as collisions
- Tracking pilot hours
- Maintaining training schedules
- Promoting a pilot to pilot-in-command
- Tracking how many craft were used
- Recording the time and resources required for the job (which will help you determine your ROI)

## 5 Delivery

For satisfied customers, this is the most important part.

UAVs have an enormous capacity to quickly and efficiently capture data, but when it comes to serving your customers, it's how you provide the data that matters.

This may involve mapping or video editing software. Depending on the type of service you provide, you may also be expected to interpret raw data so your customer can easily make use of it.

If you're a major corporation, you probably already have the systems in place to handle that type of logistical challenge. If you're a small business, you may need to invest in image processing or data analysis systems in order to use the information you gather.

# 5. Lower Risk & Increase Efficiency with Operations Management Software

So far, we've talked about regulatory and insurance requirements, as well as business processes, including managing aircraft and pilots. These are essential for running a commercial drone operation, but they can easily take time away from your revenue-generating activities (ie, the time you spend flying and providing for your customers).

That's why UAV ops management software is key for running a streamlined, safe, and scalable business.

Drone management software enables companies to manage the specific information and airspace data they need to meet business, insurance, and regulatory requirements.

UAVs aren't so different from other business operations. It would be surprising in this day and age for a controller or accountant to manage a company's

financial accounts with a paper ledger, a pencil, and an old-fashioned calculator. It would take too long, there's too much room for error, and there's no way to share it in real time with remote employees or managers.

It would also raise the eyebrows of auditors, who might wonder what that company was trying to hide.

Instead, modern businesses use transparent accounting systems to automate tasks, track performance, share records, and report back to investors, shareholders, and the government.

Managing drones is no different. As companies hire multiple pilots and build fleets of unmanned aircraft, they will begin to feel the pain of cumbersome, archaic systems that don't scale.

Best-in-class software ensures safe, scalable, efficient commercial drone operations. It gives business leaders the intelligence and processes to do business across the world, and it gives regulators and insurers the quality assurance and metrics they require.

Look for these features:

- ❑ **a validated airspace map** sourced from official regulatory bodies so you know where it's safe to fly or where you may need special permission.
- ❑ **flight planning and logging capabilities** to meet regulatory requirements, log flight hours, and operate efficiently.
- ❑ **a digital system of record** to manage pilots, training, maintenance, battery performance, flight hours, and organize key documents like pilot licenses, regulatory approvals, proof of insurance, and operating checklists, associated with specific flight records.

The more complex your operation becomes, the more you'll depend on software to ensure that your fleet is well maintained, that your pilots are trained, and that you're operating efficiently.

Spreadsheets and paper logbooks may work for a while, if you have a few flights per month and you only have one pilot and a few aircraft. But adding just one more pilot can quickly create an administrative challenge.



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We use the Skyward flight logging and maintenance tracking tools as our go-to logging tool. Before Skyward we were using spreadsheets, log books, or other tools that lacked the collaboration that we need.

Skyward quickly became essential for our business, allowing us to easily plan missions, track maintenance, pilots, and observers in real-time.

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**David Day**  
*Keystone Aerial Surveys*



# 6. Always Know Where It's Safe to Fly

Earlier, we talked about the importance of understanding your country's airspace regulations. This is about so much more than "compliance." For any company, following regulations is part of doing business, and the UAV industry is no different. But it's also about something much more important: safety.

All airspace regulations have one goal: keeping the airspace safe. For more than 100 years, airspace has been highly regulated, which is why air travel is so safe, even in highly congested areas.

Now that UAVs are allowing so many more pilots to access the skies, it's never been more important for every pilot to understand airspace and how to avoid other aircraft.

And there's no way to do that without a reliable, trustworthy, validated airspace map that shows airspace for commercial drone pilots.

In some jurisdictions, such as the United States, there are different rules for recreational and commercial pilots.

## What to Look for in a Drone Airspace Map

### Third-party validation

Consider this a requirement. The airspace data provided by regulators to mapmakers isn't always

correct. An extra level of scrutiny is the difference between accurate information about a temporary flight restriction and potentially flying into the middle of an emergency.

At Skyward, our aviation experts **validate the airspace data we receive from regulators**. And it updates every 5 minutes.

### **Easy to understand**

While professional aviators are used to VFR sectionals, it's important that everyone on your team is able to understand your drone airspace map, especially in the field. You need to be able to easily see and understand different categories of airspace as they apply to UAVs.

For example, at Skyward, our map displays information about the airspace from the surface to 500 feet above ground level because this is the airspace that is most relevant to commercial drone operators today.

### **Allows for collaboration**

As your company's drone operations scale up, you'll have more managers, pilots, subject matter experts, and other stakeholders who will need to check airspace, review flight areas and job specs, and share it among teams. An interactive, collaborative map will allow you to save time, fly safely, and ensure that everyone is on the same page.

### **REMEMBER:**

**In the sky, safety is everyone's responsibility.**

## Airspace categories for UAVs

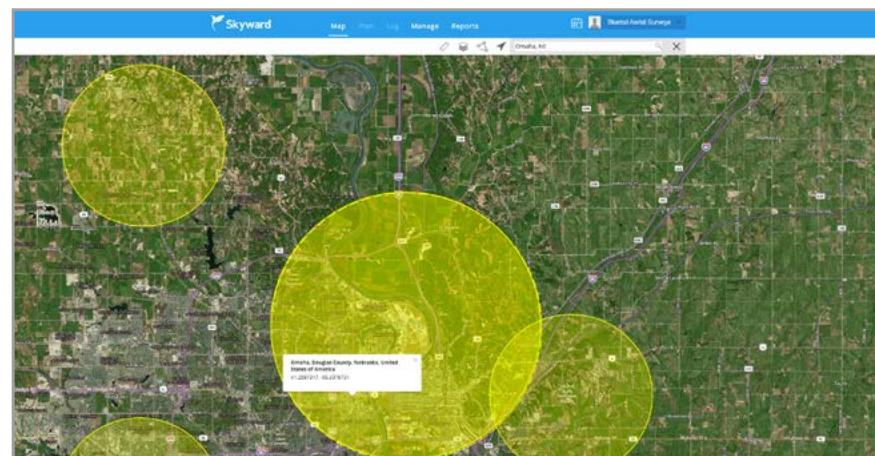
If you're a licensed pilot, you have a sophisticated understanding of airspace categories and regulations. But even if you're a director of operations, foreman, videographer, or surveyor, a basic understanding of airspace will help you plan and execute safe flights.

### Clear to Fly

If your flight job area is not within **controlled or restricted airspace** (shown as colored shapes in the Skyward map), and it meets the operating conditions specified by your commercial flight authorization, you likely won't need to plan for special airspace coordination requirements.

Follow your national civil aviation authority's notification requirements. For example, in the U.S., operators using a blanket Certificate of Authorization or Waiver (COA) need to request a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) at least 24 hours (but not more than 72 hours) before the flight.

Next, check for local or national regulations that could apply to your flight job if, for example, it's



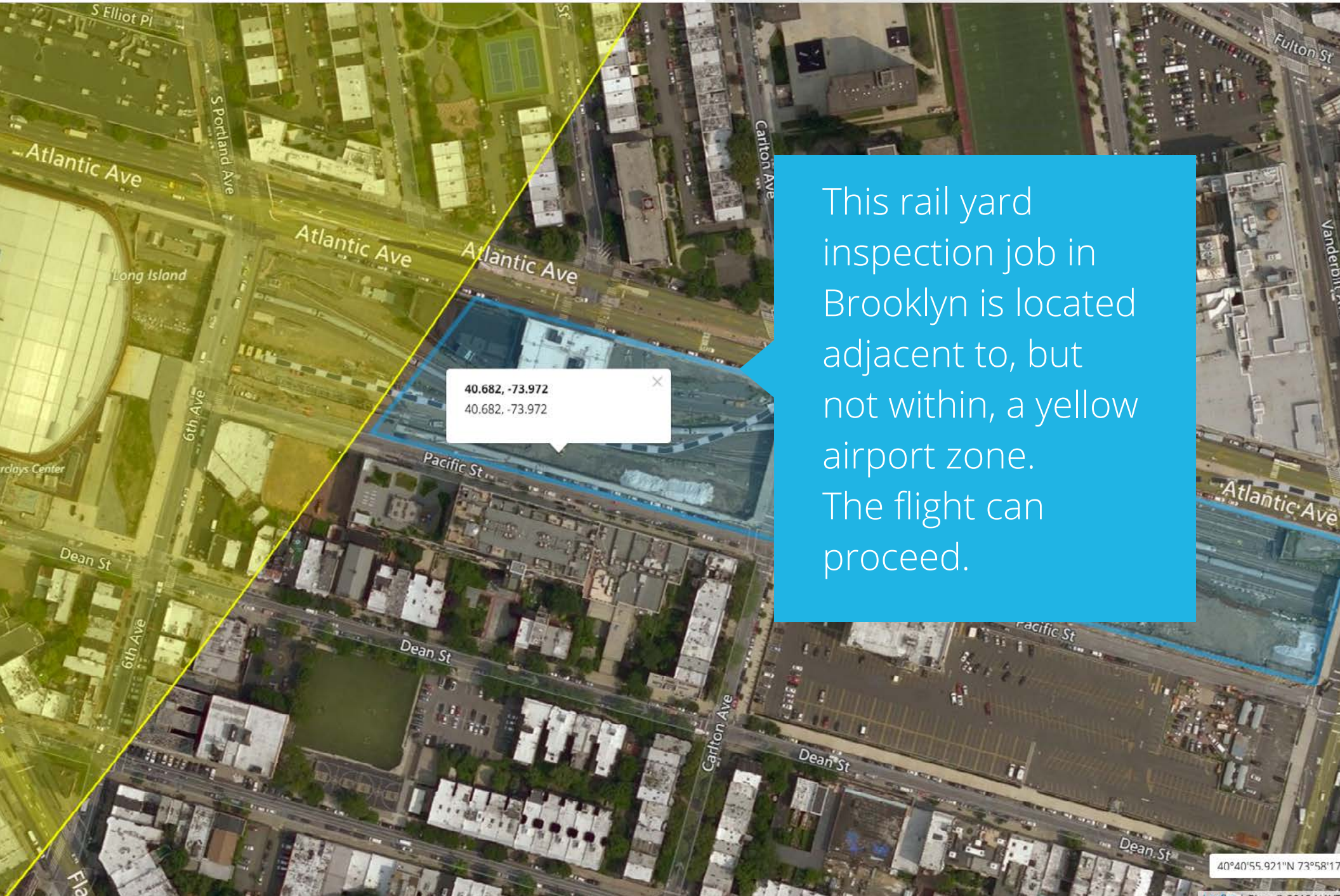
in a sensitive security or environmental area. The airspace may appear clear, but that doesn't guarantee that you are allowed to fly to or from the ground beneath it.

It's best practice to get permission from landowners before flying over private property. This may be a requirement for you; check your regulatory authorization—section 333 Exemption (U.S.) or Special Flight Operations Certificate (Canada).

#### BEST PRACTICE:

Remember to always check the map for temporary flight restrictions just before your flight.





40.682, -73.972  
40.682, -73.972

This rail yard inspection job in Brooklyn is located adjacent to, but not within, a yellow airport zone. The flight can proceed.

## Areas Around Airports

For obvious reasons, areas around airports require special care and attention. In some jurisdictions, you can request special permission to conduct a commercial operation within an airport coordination zone; in others, you may already be allowed to operate under the terms of your regulatory authorization.

In Canada, airport zones typically extend 5 NM (9 KM) from an airport. If you fly in Canada, be sure to check your SFOC—you may be required to file a NOTAM to fly within 5 NM of an airport.

In other jurisdictions, special permission may be required to operate within certain distances of aerodromes.

In the U.S., commercial UAV operations within specified distances of airports and certain heliports listed in the [FAA Airfield Facility Directory](#) require special coordination.

In the U.S., airport coordination zones match the following buffer distances:

- 5 nautical miles (NM) from an airport having an operational control tower
- 3 NM from an airport with a published instrument flight procedure, but not an operational tower
- 2 NM from an airport without a published instrument flight procedure or an operational tower
- 2 NM from a heliport published in the AFD

### **How to fly within an airport coordination zone in the U.S.**

In the U.S., you must obtain a Civil COA from the FAA if you need to fly:

1. above 400 feet above ground level, or
2. closer than the buffer distances specified in your Blanket COA and shown by the yellow-shaded airport coordination zones on the Skyward map.



Section 333 Exemption holders can use the [Civil COA website](#) to request a COA. UAS Operations within a Class B Surface Area require approval by FAA Headquarters.

Be prepared to clearly explain your operation. The best way to do this is to conduct a mission and airspace assessment before you start the COA application.

The critical elements are:

- **The Section 333 Exemption holding proponent (that's you)**
- **The aircraft that will be used (including its registration information)**
- **Location and description of the operation**
- **Affected airspace**
- **Planned method of communication with ATC**
- **Lost link and lost communications procedures**
- **Observer information**

When you begin planning your COA request, think about the affected airspace, and group your planned operations over a period of time. A Civil

COA will usually be granted for two years, so give this careful consideration.

A Civil COA will specify your notification requirements. When operating under the Civil COA be sure to follow those requirements and not the notification requirements in your blanket COA.

## Restricted Airspace

In any jurisdiction, there are likely to be at least several categories of airspace in which commercial UAV flights are allowed only under exceptional circumstances. These can include:

- temporary flight restrictions
- permanent restricted and prohibited areas and other special-use airspace
- flight restriction zones
- special flight rules areas

UAV operations are generally prohibited in all of these areas except in special cases. For example, UAV flights over a military base may be restricted to everyone except those who work there.

# 7. Hire an Experienced Flight Crew (& Provide Ongoing Training)

Different countries have different rules for commercial drone operators. In the United States, commercial drone operators must have a pilot's license. Wherever you operate, be sure to follow the regulations of the countries you're operating in.

Beyond the legalities, professional pilots may offer an advantage to companies flying commercial drones. They have deep knowledge of airspace, safety, and other types of aircraft. They may be less likely to make assumptions or cut corners. This is their area of expertise, after all.

Drone pilots will supplement, not replace, your field crew, and in most cases it probably won't make sense to transform your existing field crew into professional drone pilots (unless that is already their area of expertise). You wouldn't hire pilots to conduct wildlife surveys, build 3-D models, or produce real estate videos, so it probably doesn't make sense to hire non-experts to fly your drones.

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Training is a big part of the Aerobo secret sauce but a lot of it boils down to transferring knowledge from real operational experience. Organization, diligence, responsibility, communication, and people skills are a very large part of what makes for a good drone pilot and those are hard to teach. Ultimately though, the pilot in command is a person and once they have demonstrated their skill and have been vetted, you must be able to look them in the eye and trust them.

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**Jon Ollwerther**

*CMO Aerobo*

# Manage and Scale with Skyward's Drone Operations Management Platform



## Validated Drone Airspace Map

Plan safe flights & collaborate with your crew



## Digital System of Record

Store & organize licenses, insurance policies, & regulatory paperwork



## Drone Flight Logging

Meet regulatory requirements; track flight hours & maintenance



## Manage Your UAV Business

Schedule crew members, create efficient workflows, & track business metrics

[Start Your Free Trial](#)