

So You Just Got A New Drone?

Operation of an unmanned aircraft system (UAS) comes under the general jurisdiction of the Federal Aviation Administration, and there may be additional state and local rules that apply. The UAS pilot is responsible for knowing, understanding and following ALL those rules. Among those rules is a requirement to register your drone if it weighs over about half a pound (0.55 to be exact), a minimum age requirement (13) to fly it unsupervised, and a list of areas where it's not legal to fly your drone, or at least not without some prior coordination with an airport or air traffic control facility. Unfortunately, Broadlands' proximity to Leesburg and Dulles airports puts us in just such an area. If you plan to use a drone for business (like aerial photography or roof inspection) there are additional rules.

The UAS field is expanding much, much faster than anyone really expected, so the rules in some cases are still being developed. This makes it a bit confusing for a new UAS pilot to learn all the things he or she needs to know, but there are some excellent resources online that have pulled a lot of the information together. Of course, you can do a lot of research on your own at www.faa.gov/, but one of the best places to find a whole bunch of information in one spot is www.knowbeforeyoufly.org. There is also a smartphone app called B4UFLY available for iPhone and Android. It's still a bit of a work in progress, but has a lot of basic helpful information, including the capability to tell you if you're in an area where flight is prohibited, allowed with some restrictions, or you're just good to go. If you're flying strictly for fun, a UAS is considered a model aircraft, and the Academy of Model Aircraft has a very good set of safety guidelines that is worth a look. You can find them at www.modelaircraft.org/files/105.pdf.

The bottom line is that your new acquisition is not a toy; it's got the capability to do some serious damage to people and property if it isn't operated thoughtfully and safely. Flying is a lot of fun, but it's a lot of responsibility too. Know the rules, follow the rules, and enjoy your new UAS safely.

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