

FAA Opens the LAANC System to Recreational Drone Users

July 23, 2019

Today the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced that it has expanded the Low Altitude Authorization and Notification Capability (LAANC) system to include recreational drone users. The LAANC system, which is available at about 400 air traffic facilities covering nearly 600 airports, allows drone pilots to obtain near real-time airspace authorizations if the user intends to fly below pre-approved altitudes in controlled airspace. With the change, airports should expect an increase in recreational drone activity in controlled airspace and will no longer need to receive notifications from these users that they intend to operate within five miles of the airport.

Background.

Prior to passage of the recent FAA Reauthorization Act, hobbyist and recreational drone users were required to comply with what was known as the Special Rule for Model Aircraft if they were not FAA-certified remote pilots. This special rule included a requirement for the user to notify the airport and, if applicable, the air traffic control tower if the user intended to fly their drone within five miles of an airport. Airports have offered a number of methods to facilitate this notification requirement since the process was implemented in 2012.

In October, Congress repealed the Special Rule for Model Aircraft and instead required recreational users to comply with eight conditions before operating a small unmanned aircraft system (UAS) without FAA certification. One of the new requirements was for the operator to obtain authorization from the FAA before operating in controlled airspace around airports.

What This Means for Airports.

With today's announcement, there are several implications:

- **Recreational Users Must Obtain FAA Authorization to Fly in Controlled Airspace Through a UAS Service Supplier.** To operate in controlled airspace, recreational users must now obtain FAA authorization through an approved UAS Service Supplier (USS), which facilitates the application and approval process between the user and FAA. The FAA's web portal called DroneZone, which also accepts and approves authorization requests, is not available for the recreational community until a later date. It is important to note that a recreational user cannot operate outside of the limitations outlined in an airport's UAS Facility Map unless the user is certificated under 14 C.F.R. Part 107 as a remote pilot.
- **Airports Should Expect Increased Recreational Drone Activity in Controlled Airspace.** The FAA previously announced that recreational drone users had to obtain an airspace authorization from the FAA before operating in controlled airspace; however, the FAA also indicated that no method was available for these users to actually obtain the authorization they needed. With today's announcement, recreational users will once again be permitted to operate in controlled airspace after essentially a two-month closure. This will increase activity compared to previous months.
- **Airports No Longer Need to Accept Recreational User Notifications.** As previously reported, the FAA has advised recreational UAS operators not to notify the airport operator or air traffic control tower if the user intends to operate within five miles of an airport. This applies to airports in both uncontrolled and controlled airspace. Airports no longer need the processes which they have established in the past to facilitate this notification requirement.