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Today, the FAA announced a new online registration process for unmanned aerial vehicles ("UAVs") weighing between 0.55 pounds and 55 pounds and operated for recreational purposes. The online system opens on December 21, 2015, and all hobbyist drones purchased after that date must be registered before the first flight. Individuals who acquired UAVs before December 21 must register their craft no later than February 19, 2016.

The new online registration process only applies to those who operate lightweight UAVs for recreational purposes. Operators who intend to use UAVs commercially or operate UAVs that weigh more than 55 pounds must continue to register their aircraft separately using established FAA procedures.

The registration form will be available on December 21 at www.faa.gov/uas/registration. A $5 fee will be required, but the FAA will refund all fees for those who register their UAVs before January 20, 2016. Registrants must be 13 years of age or older and US citizens or permanent residents; they must provide their names, physical addresses, and e-mail addresses. (Because the FAA's rules only permit aircraft registration for U.S. citizens and permanent residents, foreign nationals who provide their information will receive a certificate in recognition of UAV ownership.)

The same registration number will apply to all UAVs owned by a single individual. Upon registration, the individual will be able to download a certificate of registration; the FAA also will send it to the e-mail address of record. When operating the UAV, the owner must be able to present the certificate in print or electronically if asked for proof of registration. In addition, users must mark the registration number on the UAV in a legible manner and in a location that allows the number to be readily seen. The registration number may be placed in a battery compartment as long as it can be accessed without the use of tools. Each registration will last three years, after which it may be renewed online.

The FAA said that it intends to continue to work with vendors to make it possible to register UAVs at the point of sale. The FAA did not announce any timeline for this effort, and the new rules do not require point-of-sale registration.

The FAA emphasized that a key goal of the process is to educate UAV operators regarding aviation safety. While the FAA has the authority to assess civil penalties up to $27,500 and criminal penalties of up to $250,000 and/or imprisonment for up to three years, the agency said its primary goal at this point is not sanctions. The agency is likely to resort to those penalties only in extremely egregious cases.

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