

Drones are here. Now. Read your NOTAMS

Increasing RPAS activity in New Zealand skies highlights the critical need for pilots to know where they might encounter one.

The recent close calls between rogue drones and airliners at Auckland Airport have unsettled everyone.

No-one wants a collision. And yet there are numerous pilots who run the heightened risk of one. They're failing to consult NOTAMS, including those now being originated by drone operators notifying their RPAS activity.

Once an RPAS operator becomes certificated under Part 102, they may also apply to become an authorized NOTAM originator. Many of them have. That means, with just 24 hours' notice, they can apply to have a NOTAM issued.

Paula Moore, who's with the CAA's Aeronautical Services team, says that such a NOTAM just says, 'We're operating here.'

"That doesn't mean no aircraft can fly there – it's not restricted airspace. It just means you have to be extremely careful if you do."

Paula – who designates special use airspace for New Zealand – says *all* pilots need to read NOTAMS before they depart. "And if they are so equipped, again on their flight – just in case".

Clayton Hughes, the manager of the RPAS team at CAA, agrees. "It's problematic enough when RPAS operators don't follow the rules and pose a hazard to others.

"But when an operator does do the right thing, and notifies the rest of the aviation community of some activity, it's extremely frustrating that pilots don't refer to the bulletins designed to tell them about that activity."

Current flight testing in Canterbury of the pilotless aircraft 'Cora' – being developed as a future air taxi – is a good example of what pilots can expect more of in the future.

"This project," says Pete Sutherland, CAA's liaison with the Cora programme, "and others that may present similar risks in the future, highlight the need for all airspace users to be aware of growing RPAS activities within their area of operations."

CAA unmanned aircraft specialist Mark Houston says that Cora, and other similar sized unmanned aircraft, are equivalent to a Cessna 172 in size and mass, and their intended performance.

"The testing of such unmanned aircraft is now a part of the New Zealand aviation system, and keeping them separate from airborne crewed aircraft is clearly a vital safety requirement.

"It's a shared responsibility. RPAS operators legally flying their drones outside Part 101 need to inform the aviation community of that. But aircraft crews have to do their bit for safety by actually consulting NOTAMS and AIP Supplements."

"It doesn't matter what the activity is," says Paula Moore. "Whether it's for RPAS testing, live firing, police or fire emergencies, military training; or if the airspace has been designated as a restricted, danger or military operating area – pilots have to do the right thing and brief themselves.

"And remember, without approval from the administering authority, it's breaching rule 91.129 to fly in a restricted area, and breaching rule 91.133 in the case of a military operating area.

"So stay on the right side of the rules – and safety."

Further information

Accessing NOTAMS at ifis.airways.co.nz is free. Or use the IFIS Mobile app to get NOTAMS and weather information.

For free access to AIP Supplements, go to www.aip.net.nz. ■

