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Aviation industry 'blindsided' by new rules that do away with licensing for topdressing drone operators



[Roeland van den Bergh](#) | [The Post](#)

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The topdressing industry has acknowledged that drones are increasingly able to replace helicopters and planes when it came to spraying and topdressing.

Photo: Supplied

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Changes to rules covering the use of drones on rural land have blindsided some in the aviation sector – as some regulations would mean drones fly without Civil Aviation Authority oversight.

Spraying pesticide or applying fertiliser would no longer be the exclusive domain of licensed pilots flying planes and helicopters – and instead shared with unlicensed, unpiloted drones.

But many in the industry acknowledge a truth that is increasingly evident – that drones are increasingly able to replace helicopters and planes when it came to spraying and topdressing, and that was going to have a heavy impact on the sector.

So much so that topdressers were now being encouraged to adopt the drone technology themselves, so they could offer both modes of applying pesticides and fertiliser and keep their businesses relevant as farmers sought to reduce costs.

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Either way, those using drones should still have to undertake licensing to use drones, including training and competency assessments, the peak aviation body said. A new policy that would result in “lower risk routine drone operations”, no longer requiring pre-work certification from the Civil Aviation Authority, with operators needing only to alert the regulator before starting work.

Simon Wallace, who heads the Aviation Industry Association, said the sector was blindsided by Associate Aviation Minister James Meager’s announcement last month that included this new rule as part of a suite to slash red tape for agriculture drone operators.

Wallace said there were “a lot of risks” around doing away with licensing regimes, even if acknowledging the inevitability of drones doing more around farms.

get it.

Drones would not replace helicopters or aeroplanes in the mid to near-term future.

“But I think over time, like moving to electric aircraft, we will,” Wallace told *The Post*.

Writing on the wall

There are thought to be 160 large agricultural drones operating in the country, with that number growing. Some weigh more than 100kg fully loaded.

Tony Michelle owns a top dressing business and is executive officer of the New Zealand Agricultural Industry Association. He has been encouraging his members to adopt drones, to avoid their businesses becoming obsolete.

Some operators were already making the change, Michelle said. “They're thinking about how they're going to integrate this kind of technology into their existing business. The reality is if the clients are demanding it and if you can't deliver it, they'll go and find it elsewhere.”

An example was a helicopter operator in Canterbury who was finding it increasingly difficult to spray fertiliser on paddocks that also had waterways running through them. He could not always manage the risk of the spray falling into those waters. As a result operators were walking away from those jobs, Michelle said.

But that did not spell the end of helicopter spraying, he said. An operator with a drone could accurately spray the areas along the waterway and a helicopter could cover the main part of the field.

However, there was a risk that helicopter and fixed wing aircraft would refuse to take on aerial spraying jobs in some situations, particularly where they were close to lifestyle blocks.



Tony Michelle, who is executive officer of the New Zealand Agricultural Industry Association, is encouraging his members to adopt drones to avoid their businesses becoming obsolete.

Photo: ALDEN WILLIAMS / The Press

Size matters

Michelle said one topdressing operator, with 30 years' experience, was importing a large drone capable of carrying a payload of 250 litres of spray – the size needed for a commercial operation.

“It's bloody hard to make a living with a 40-litre drone. It would take all day to spray 10 hectares, when a helicopter will do it in an hour,” he said.

But a number of spray drone operators were specialising in horticulture, in particular avocados, grapes and apples, he said.

Contractors were mostly taking a cautious approach to picking up the technology as part of their business. “But my view is it will come as the client demands it, and the capacity of drones increases.”

As the carrying capacity increased to 250-litre tanks and up to 500 litres “that will be the game changer. That's when operators will start to adopt the technology,” Michelle said.

While helicopters were being converted to fly autonomously overseas, large electric drones would still be cheaper to operate as electric motors had almost no moving parts, while fossil fuel-engined aircraft required expensive certified parts.

Red tape?

Not only was Meager keen to dispense with “red tape” around topdressing, but he also suggested at the recent Aviation Industry Association annual meeting that concerns about agriculture drones were overstated.

Meager denied there would be “thousands of drones flying cross country. You're talking about fairly basic standard routine operations within the boundaries of the existing farm block.”

“You're talking about business owners and operators who are not going to spend \$50, \$60,000 on a piece of kit to fly into the nearest (irrigation) pivot.”

While the new policy would see an end to pre-work certification from the CAA, existing regulations and systems for health and safety, workplace rules and spraying operations still had to be adhered to, he said.

The time and energy spent on certification was not commensurate with the risk involved in some of those very small operators, he added.

“We have to have confidence New Zealanders who work with large agricultural machinery all the time, generally know what they're doing, and they can be trusted to undertake some of that routine stuff.”

Details of the rules for agriculture drones would be worked out over the next few months.



Operating a drone sprayer was not simply a matter of pushing the go button and the drone goes about its work without further input from the operator, Andrew Shelley managing director of drone training provider Fenix UAS says.

Too slow

Michelle said Meager's comments were off the mark because there was "nothing routine or normal about spraying agrochemicals".

"That's why we have rules and regional plans to manage these things. And that's where the minister has missed the mark in our view."

But not everyone has that view.

Andrew Shelley is the managing director of drone training provider Fenix UAS.

He said farmers were keen to get going with their own drones but the process to get certification from CAA took eight months.

"We've proposed multiple things to CAA over the years that haven't been accepted. One of them was a standard manual to speed up the process," he said.

Operating a drone sprayer was not simply a matter of pushing the go button and the drone goes about its work without further input from the operator, he said.

Gaining certification was important because while contractors and farmers might understand ground spraying well, doing so flying a few metres above the ground changed the behaviour of the chemicals.

The cost of drones starts at about \$30,000 for a basic setup. But to operate efficiently required four additional sets of batteries at \$2500 each and an expensive high speed charger, Shelley said.

Local topography presented a number of challenges and dangers for agricultural drone operators, including mountainous terrain and cables running up hills and across valleys.

And for chemical spraying, changeable wind directions could be difficult to detect standing at the bottom of a hill.

Drones were usually flown autonomously following a programmed GPS track covering an area, but pilots also had to be mindful of the direction of the wind and to offset that for spray drift to avoid sensitive areas such as waterways.

The small spray tank on drones made them labour intensive, needing to be refilled about every 10 minutes, along with replacing the batteries, making for a job that could take a couple of hours to complete.

As a result, the economics still favours aircraft and helicopters for larger-scale work, over drones, Shelley said.

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