

Create a “Drone Zone” in Your Community

With all the media attention surrounding “drones” or multirotor radio-controlled aircraft, there has been much confusion about what constitutes legal and safe operation of these aircraft, and what does not.

The hobby of RC aircraft flying has been around for many years. New aircraft types have been invented and have made their way into the hobby. Radio controlled helicopters, for example, were not part of the model aircraft scene until the early '70's when designers were able to miniaturize the helicopter into a model that would fly just like the full-scale versions. Now, they are a very popular part of model aviation. For hobbyists, the drone is just another type of aircraft.

Multirotor aircraft have been around for just a few years, but they have brought with them the added twist of being able to support an onboard video camera, which can transmit down to a receiver and be displayed on a video screen or headset giving the model pilot the sensation of flying the model while sitting inside the pilot's seat! This is known as First-Person View or FPV flying. Modelers have wanted to experience this type of flying for a long time, and now technology has made it happen. Imagine the thrill of piloting a model through maneuvers, and seeing what that looks like from the model's perspective. It is a cool experience, and one that is really catching on.

Because the aircraft is equipped with FPV, it is now also possible to fly the aircraft beyond the visual line of sight of the model pilot. This is because they can see where they are going via the FPV video. Here is where the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) step in. The AMA has been the membership organization for modelers in the US for more than 85 years. The AMA Safety Code has been developed to provide safe operations of models in the National Air Space (NAS) all this time. The FAA has recognized the AMA as a community-based organization with knowledge and expertise on how hobbyists can safely fly model aircraft.

The AMA Safety Code does not allow for FPV model aircraft to be flown outside the pilot's line of sight. AMA believes—and the FAA agrees—that models flown outside the pilot's line of sight are not hobby aircraft, but are Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (sUAS) or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and are flown with a specific purpose. These aircraft do not fly by AMA rules, but are governed by the FAA and have specific requirements to operate. Most of the time, these will be commercial operations either delivering packages or monitoring. Applications range from farmers checking crop growth and conditions, to forest fire monitoring, police and safety monitoring, and many others. We are all well aware of how drones are used by the military in the Middle East to deliver military payloads to a target, with devastating accuracy and effect.

So, what is legal and why should we be concerned?

The AMA has been recognized by the FAA as the authority for model operations for the hobbyist. The definition of model operations is that the model aircraft is flown strictly for hobby or recreational use. The FAA relies on the AMA Safety Code to guide the modeler to safe and legal activity.

With all the negative publicity of drones within the media, the AMA is working to tell it's story about model aviation and the many safe years of activity, as long as modelers follows the safety code. While there will always be those who want to operate outside the limits, and have no regard to the safety of others, AMA members understand the importance of safety and what we can and can't do, and can teach that to others. Most new operators want to be safe and follow the rules, they just don't know what those rule are and have not been taught. Creating a flying site where knowledge and skills are taught and shared fits well into the plans of parks and their outreach to the local community.

Creating a safe place for modelers to enjoy their aircraft—drones included—is vital! Many of the drone pilots you hear about on the news today will find a place to fly, whether it is safe or appropriate for the activity or not.

Skateboarders used to operate on city sidewalks, causing lots of problems. They needed a place to enjoy their hobby. By creating a skateboard park, cities and counties solved this problem and now point skateboarders to the park. Using skateboarding as an example, providing a safe place for all model aircraft to fly is a solution to a problem. When someone flies in an inappropriate location, you can point them to a safe and legal flying site in the park. An added advantage is that other modelers will be there and they can learn from each other and even teach new interested pilots.

Creating a flying site for this activity is easy. All that is needed is an open grassy area approximately the size of a soccer or football field. Obviously larger venues will work well also. The most important aspect of the site is the actual area where the aircraft will fly. This needs to be defined so that the pilots know when they are getting close to the edge of the site, so they don't exceed the boundaries. Most of the time the boundaries can be marked by simple athletic cones with signs plugged into the top stating that it is a model flying site and ask for people to please stay out of the active flying area indicated.

With the flying area marked, the pilots can stand next to the flight area when flying the models. The line created by the pilots is called the Safety Line and extends past the end of the flight area. This safety line marks the edge of the "no-fly zone" behind the pilots. The purpose of the line is to make sure that all flying model aircraft stay forward of the line. This creates a safe area behind the pilots were they can place their aircraft and support equipment, and also allows for a safe location for spectators.

That's all there is to it!

Now that you have a site, you need to set up safe flying procedures. Partnering with an AMA Chartered Club—or forming a new one—will give you instant experts to help you oversee the safe operation of the site, work with you to improve the site, and provide training to new pilots. As an AMA Chartered Club, they can even provide the city or park management with a \$2.5 million primary flying site insurance policy that covers liability for the activity. Each individual AMA member has a personal \$2.5 million policy that covers his or her individual liabilities, so now both the pilot and site owner are covered.

AMA has a set of safety rules that each AMA member must follow. These rules are what set AMA members apart from non-members. These rules have been tested and refined throughout the years and, as a result, the FAA has recognized the AMA as the authority for safe model aircraft operation in the US. When you partner with an AMA Chartered Club, you become part of our modeling family with more than 185,000 members and 2,400 AMA Charted Clubs, and has the approval of the FAA! This partnership is a key in ensuring that safe operations of the site will be monitored and controlled. AMA members are big on safety!

The AMA Chartered Club has access to many other AMA benefits including education programs to enhance the flying experience at your field. AMA's Education Department can show you how to work with local schools by providing learning programs with STEM (**S**cience, **T**echnology, **E**ngineering, and **M**ath) components with an aeronautical slant. Club members can get involved with schools by providing aeronautical programs with hands-on components including instruction on building, trimming, and flying models, as well as help with teaching aerodynamics. Even summer camps on aeromodeling can be part of your park programming.

Model aviation appeals to all ages, genders, and abilities. Most areas of parks are designed for the sports-minded and that is fine. This activity appeals to everyone, not just the athlete. Seniors are very active in model aviation. Youth love the action and excitement it brings, along with the satisfaction of learning a new skill. Many disabled and military veterans are deeply involved with model aircraft. It's something everyone can enjoy!

Having featured model events can also bring in modelers from outside the area to participate. This brings dollars into your community through gas/hotel/food sales, as well as highlighting the model activity at your park. Truly, everyone wins!