OPERATIONS GOVERNANCE

Who Controls How Aircraft and UAS Operate?

Operations governance is where many people first encounter aviation regulation directly. Different types of aircraft and missions operate under different federal operating rules, certifications, and safety frameworks. Emerging AAM concepts are being integrated into many of these existing operational structures rather than through one entirely new operating system.

This is one reason it can be misleading to treat all AAM operations as a single category. A recreational ultralight vehicle, a public safety drone operation, a medical delivery flight, an agricultural spraying operation, and a passenger-carrying aircraft may all operate under different sections of federal aviation regulation.

The FAA establishes operational rules through multiple parts of Title 14 of the Code of Federal Regulations (14 CFR). Some of the operational frameworks most relevant to Utah communities include:

- Part 91 – General aviation operating rules,
- Part 103 – Ultralight vehicles,
- Part 107 – Small unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS),
- Part 108 – Future Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) framework for unmanned aircraft systems,
- Part 121 – Scheduled air carrier operations,
- Part 135 – On-demand and commuter operations,
- Part 136 – Commercial air tours and sightseeing operations,
- and Part 137 – Agricultural aircraft operations.

These operational frameworks establish different requirements for:

- pilot qualifications,
- operational limitations,
- maintenance,
- dispatch,
- oversight,
- operational tempo,
- and acceptable levels of risk.

Part 121 airline operations represent one of the most structured and heavily regulated operating environments in aviation. Other operating frameworks, such as Part 91 or Part 135, may involve different operational flexibility, oversight structures, and risk environments. Understanding these distinctions is important when communities evaluate future AAM operations and compare them to existing commercial airline expectations.

Utah already experiences many of these operational categories today. Agricultural aviation is common in rural areas. Part 135 charter and helicopter operations occur throughout the state. Public safety and infrastructure inspection drone operations are increasingly common. Air tour and recreational operations also play an important role in Utah's tourism economy.

Many emerging AAM operations are expected to build upon these existing operational categories rather than replace them entirely.

Public-sector UAS operations create an additional layer of complexity because local governments, utilities, transportation agencies, and emergency responders may become aircraft operators themselves. In these situations, a local government may simultaneously function as:

- a regulator of land use,
- an emergency responder,
- a community representative,
- and an aircraft operator operating under FAA rules.

Operations also influence infrastructure needs. Different operating frameworks may require different:

- launch and recovery environments,
- emergency response capabilities,
- maintenance support,
- weather capabilities,
- communications systems,
- operational control structures,
- and supporting infrastructure.

Responsible | Primary Regulatory or Operational Lead

FAA

The FAA is primarily responsible for:

- operational rules,
- flight standards,
- pilot and operator requirements,
- operational limitations,
- unmanned aircraft operating rules,
- and operational safety oversight.

The FAA establishes the operational frameworks that govern how aircraft and unmanned aircraft systems legally operate within the National Airspace System.

Accountable | Primary Entity Responsible for Compliance or Implementation

Operators and Pilots

Operators are responsible for complying with applicable FAA operational rules, certifications, maintenance requirements, and operational procedures.

Infrastructure owners and facility operators may also support safe operations by maintaining accurate facility information, conducting appropriate inspections, communicating known facility conditions, and coordinating notices or advisories when conditions change. This does not transfer operational responsibility away from pilots, remote pilots, or certificate holders, but it helps ensure operators can make informed decisions based on the conditions actually present at the site.

Pilots and remote pilots are responsible for operating aircraft in accordance with applicable operational limitations, training requirements, and operational safety procedures.

Consulted | Organizations or Stakeholders Typically Engaged During Planning, Review, or Operations

Depending on the operation, coordination may include:

- FAA,
- operators,
- airports,
- UDOT Aeronautics,
- local agencies operating UAS programs,
- emergency responders,
- utilities,
- and affected property owners or communities.

Some operations may also involve coordination with:

- hospitals,
- public safety agencies,
- agricultural operators,
- military stakeholders,
- or transportation agencies.

Informed | Stakeholders Commonly Affected, Notified, or Engaged

Stakeholders commonly informed or affected may include:

- nearby communities,
- policymakers,
- planners,
- airport sponsors,
- transportation agencies,

- emergency responders,
- businesses,
- and the general public.

Important Distinctions

Local governments do not:

- establish federal flight rules,
- certify operators,
- establish pilot licensing requirements,
- approve aircraft operations within navigable airspace,
- or independently regulate operational safety standards.

Local governments may still play important roles related to:

- public-sector UAS programs,
- emergency response planning,
- land-use compatibility,
- infrastructure coordination,
- public engagement,
- and community planning associated with aviation operations.

Key References

- 14 CFR Part 91
- 14 CFR Part 103
- 14 CFR Part 107
- 14 CFR Part 108 (proposed)
- 14 CFR Part 121
- 14 CFR Part 133
- 14 CFR Part 135
- 14 CFR Part 136
- 14 CFR Part 137
- FAA Fact Sheet: State and Local Regulation of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS)
- GAO-23-105189, Drones: FAA Should Improve Its Approach to Integrating Drones into the National Airspace System
- GAO-24-106451, Advanced Air Mobility: Legal Authorities and Issues to Consider for Operations