

Drone Program Readiness Checklist

Whether you are standing up a first aircraft or maturing a fleet already in the air, the same eight domains decide whether a drone program produces defensible results or produces liability. Work through them honestly. The gaps you find here are cheaper to close on paper than in an after-action review.

How to use this

Score every line in one of the three columns. Do not score a line as In place unless it is written down, someone owns it by name, and it survived its last test. Verbal understanding is not a program.

Who it applies to

The checklist is written to serve a public agency or a commercial operator. Lines tagged **AGY** apply mainly to government and public safety programs; lines tagged **COM** apply mainly to commercial ones. Everything untagged applies to both.

1 MISSION AND GOVERNANCE

Why the program exists, and who answers for it

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Defined mission set. The specific tasks the aircraft will and will not be used for are written down, not assumed.	☐	☐	☐
Executive sponsor and program manager. One accountable executive and one named day-to-day program manager, with the authority to ground a flight.	☐	☐	☐
Written UAS policy. An approved policy covering authorized uses, prohibited uses, approval thresholds, and consequences for deviation.	☐	☐	☐
Public transparency plan. Published policy, a stated position on what is and is not recorded, and a channel for community questions. AGY	☐	☐	☐
Defined success measures. Agreed metrics such as response time, inspection cost avoided, or personnel hours kept off a roof or a ladder, with a baseline captured before launch.	☐	☐	☐

2 REGULATORY AUTHORITY AND AIRSPACE

The legal basis for every flight

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Operating pathway chosen. Part 107 for the organization, or, for a public agency, a Certificate of Waiver or Authorization for public aircraft operations. Many agencies run both deliberately: Part 107 for routine work, the COA for missions that need what Part 107 will not give. AGY	☐	☐	☐
Aircraft registered. Every airframe registered with the FAA and marked with its registration number.	☐	☐	☐
Remote ID compliant. Standard Remote ID aircraft or a broadcast module fitted. This applies regardless of weight when flying under Part 107; the sub-250 gram exemption is recreational only.	☐	☐	☐
Airspace authorization process. LAANC access established, a named person responsible for pulling authorizations, and a documented procedure for controlled airspace, TFRs, and NOTAMs, including the manual request path for sites LAANC does not cover.	☐	☐	☐
Waivers identified. Any operation outside standard Part 107 limits (night without compliant lighting, over people outside an eligible category, beyond visual line of sight, multiple aircraft per pilot) is covered by a waiver, an exemption, or a COA, or else restructured or taken off the table.	☐	☐	☐
State and local law reviewed. Counsel has reviewed state drone statutes, surveillance and evidence law, and any local ordinance affecting launch sites or recording.	☐	☐	☐

On beyond visual line of sight. Routine BVLOS is not yet generally available. The Part 108 proposed rule published in August 2025, and the final rule went to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs for review on 10 July 2026, its last stop before publication. Review of a significant rule can run 90 days, so publication is most likely late 2026 or into 2027. Until then BVLOS is reached only through a Part 107 waiver, a statutory exemption, or, for a public agency, a COA. Any vendor or plan that assumes routine BVLOS today is selling a timeline it does not control. Build the program so it works under visual line of sight and can scale when the rule lands.

3 PEOPLE, TRAINING, AND CURRENCY

The most common single point of failure

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Certificated pilots. Every remote pilot in command holds a current Part 107 remote pilot certificate, with recurrent training completed inside the 24 calendar month cycle and the record on file.	☐	☐	☐
Enough depth. More than one qualified pilot, so the program does not stop when one person is on leave, injured, or resigns.	☐	☐	☐
Visual observers trained. Observers know their role, the phraseology, and when to call a stop, rather than being whoever was standing nearby.	☐	☐	☐
Currency standard. A written minimum, for example a set number of flights or hours per quarter per platform, with a documented path back to currency after a lapse.	☐	☐	☐
Mission-specific proficiency. Pilots have practiced the actual mission, at night, in wind, and around obstacles, before doing it for real under pressure.	☐	☐	☐
Fitness to fly. A self-assessment standard covering fatigue, illness, medication, and stress, with an explicit no-fault way to decline a flight.	☐	☐	☐

4 AIRCRAFT, PAYLOAD, AND SUPPLY CHAIN

Fit for the mission, and still supportable in three years

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Platform matched to mission. The airframe and payload were chosen from the mission set, not the other way around. Thermal, zoom, RTK, and low-light capability are specified where the mission needs them and left out where it does not.	☐	☐	☐
Procurement restrictions checked. Federal, state, and grant-funded restrictions on covered foreign manufacturers reviewed before purchase, not after. This has stranded more agency fleets than any technical failure. AGY	☐	☐	☐
Spares and consumables. Batteries, propellers, and a spare airframe budgeted, with battery count sized to the longest realistic mission rather than the shortest.	☐	☐	☐
Battery handling and storage. A written lithium battery procedure covering charge state for storage, cycle tracking, retirement criteria, damaged-cell handling, and fire-safe storage. Assume one will fail and plan where it fails.	☐	☐	☐
Maintenance and firmware. A scheduled inspection interval, a maintenance log per airframe, and a controlled firmware policy so an update does not land mid-mission.	☐	☐	☐
Lifecycle funded. A replacement cycle and a sustainment line in the budget. Aircraft bought with one-time money and no sustainment line become shelf ornaments in about three years.	☐	☐	☐

5 FLIGHT OPERATIONS AND RISK MANAGEMENT

What the crew actually does on the day

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Operations manual. A single document covering crew roles, briefing content, checklists, communication, and the authority to stop. It should be short enough that people actually read it.	☐	☐	☐
Preflight and postflight checklists. Physical or on-device, used every time, including by the most experienced pilot on the team.	☐	☐	☐
Written weather minimums. Wind, gust, visibility, ceiling, temperature, and precipitation limits set in advance, so the decision is not made by an eager crew standing in a parking lot.	☐	☐	☐
Site risk assessment. A repeatable pre-mission survey covering obstacles and wires, overhead hazards, non-participating people, launch and recovery areas, and the planned ditch point.	☐	☐	☐
Emergency procedures. Briefed and practiced responses for loss of link, loss of GPS, low battery, fly-away, injury, and property damage, including who calls whom and in what order.	☐	☐	☐
Incident reporting and just culture. A route for reporting near-misses that does not punish the reporter. Programs that only hear about crashes learn nothing until one happens.	☐	☐	☐
Deconfliction with manned aircraft. Coordination procedure with any air unit, medical helicopter operator, or agency aircraft working the same area, agreed before the first joint incident, not during it. AGY	☐	☐	☐

6 DATA, PRIVACY, AND RECORDS

Where programs get sued, not where they crash

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Retention schedule. A written rule for how long imagery and flight data are kept, where, and who authorizes deletion, aligned to records law or contract terms.	☐	☐	☐
Chain of custody. A defensible path from sensor to storage for anything that may become evidence or support a claim, with access logged.	☐	☐	☐
Privacy standard. Rules on incidental capture, camera discipline over private property, and redaction before release. Written before the first complaint, not after.	☐	☐	☐
Public records readiness. A tested workflow for responding to a records request, including redaction capacity and timelines. AGY	☐	☐	☐
Storage and cybersecurity. A decision on cloud versus on-premises, made with IT, covering where data physically resides, who the vendor is, encryption at rest and in transit, and account and device controls.	☐	☐	☐
Flight logging. Every flight logged with date, crew, aircraft, location, authorization, duration, and outcome, in a system that can be queried later.	☐	☐	☐

7 INSURANCE, CONTRACTS, AND LIABILITY

Confirm the coverage before you need it

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Liability coverage confirmed. Aviation liability at a limit that matches the exposure, written for unmanned operations. A general liability policy frequently excludes aircraft; read the exclusion, do not assume.	☐	☐	☐
Hull and payload coverage. Decided deliberately, including whether self-insuring the airframe is cheaper than the premium at your fleet size.	☐	☐	☐
Contract terms. Scope, deliverable format, weather and reflight terms, data ownership, and limitation of liability written into the agreement. COM	☐	☐	☐
Vendor and contractor vetting. Any outside pilot flown on your behalf has their certificate, insurance, and additional-insured endorsement on file before the first flight.	☐	☐	☐
Accident reporting. A named person responsible for FAA accident reporting inside the ten calendar day window, plus internal notification and legal hold procedures.	☐	☐	☐

8 SUSTAINMENT AND GROWTH

Whether the program is still working in year three

ITEM	NOT STARTED	IN PROGRESS	IN PLACE
Recurring budget. Training, insurance, batteries, software subscriptions, and replacement aircraft funded annually rather than from a one-time grant or capital purchase.	☐	☐	☐
Documented results. Outcomes captured against the baseline from domain one, in a form a budget authority or a client will accept.	☐	☐	☐
Annual program review. A scheduled review of policy, training records, incidents, and equipment condition, with findings assigned to owners and dates.	☐	☐	☐
Succession. The program survives the departure of its founder. Knowledge is documented, not resident in one enthusiast.	☐	☐	☐
Scaling path. A stated view on what would justify additional aircraft, additional pilots, docked or tethered systems, or BVLOS operations once the rule allows it.	☐	☐	☐

Reading your score: count the In place column

Foundational

0 TO 15 IN PLACE

You have aircraft or intent, but not yet a program. Priority is policy, pilot certification, and a written operations manual before the flight tempo rises. Flying more right now increases exposure faster than it builds capability.

Operational

16 TO 30 IN PLACE

The program flies safely on a normal day. The gaps are usually depth of pilots, data retention, and what happens on an abnormal day. Test the emergency procedures and the records workflow before something forces you to.

Mature

31 OR MORE IN PLACE

Documented, resourced, and survivable. Focus shifts to measured outcomes, annual review discipline, and a deliberate scaling decision rather than opportunistic growth.

DAYS 1 TO 30

Decide and authorize

- Write the mission set and the prohibited uses.
- Name the executive sponsor and program manager.
- Choose the operating pathway: Part 107, a public COA, or both.
- Get counsel to review state law, privacy, and records obligations.
- Capture the baseline metrics you intend to be judged against.

DAYS 31 TO 60

Qualify and equip

- Certificate at least two pilots, and train the observers.
- Select aircraft and payload from the mission set, after checking procurement restrictions.
- Bind insurance and confirm the aircraft exclusion language.
- Stand up storage, access control, and the flight log.
- Draft the operations manual and the checklists.

DAYS 61 TO 90

Prove it before you need it

- Fly training missions that mirror the real one, including at night and in wind.
- Run the emergency procedures as a drill, not as a briefing.
- Test a records request or a client data handover end to end.
- Rescore this checklist and assign every remaining gap an owner and a date.
- Set the annual review date before the launch enthusiasm fades.

10 QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING BEFORE YOU BUY ANYTHING

Put these to any vendor, integrator, or consultant

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| <p>01 Which of my missions does this platform actually do, and which does it only do in a demo?</p> <p>02 What is the total cost over five years, including batteries, training, software, insurance, and replacement?</p> <p>03 Are there procurement or funding restrictions on this manufacturer that apply to us?</p> <p>04 Where does our data physically live, who else can access it, and can we get all of it back on exit?</p> <p>05 What does this require that we do not have today: a waiver, a COA, an extra pilot, an observer, IT support?</p> | <p>06 Who trains our people, to what standard, and what does recurrent training cost each year?</p> <p>07 What is the support path when an aircraft is down, and what is the realistic turnaround?</p> <p>08 What capability are you describing as available today that actually depends on a rule that is not final yet?</p> <p>09 Show me an organization my size, doing my mission, running this for more than two years.</p> <p>10 What would you tell me not to buy?</p> |
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11 TERMS THAT WILL COME UP

Plain-language reference for non-aviation decision makers

Part 107

The FAA rule most civil small drone operations fly under. Requires a certificated remote pilot, visual line of sight, and a 400 ft ceiling unless waived.

RPIC

Remote pilot in command. The certificated person legally responsible for the flight, including the decision not to fly.

LAANC

The automated system that grants near-real-time authorization to fly in controlled airspace near an airport. It does not cover every facility, and a zero-foot grid square still needs a manual request with weeks of lead time.

Part 108

The FAA rule that will make routine beyond visual line of sight operations legal at scale. Proposed August 2025; the final rule was in White House review as of August 2026 and is not yet published.

VO

Visual observer. A trained crew member who keeps eyes on the aircraft and its surroundings and communicates directly with the pilot.

Remote ID

The broadcast identification a drone must transmit in flight. Required for commercial operations regardless of aircraft weight.

COA

Certificate of Waiver or Authorization. A government entity's alternative pathway, allowing self-certification of aircraft and crews for public aircraft operations.

VLOS and BVLOS

Visual line of sight, and beyond it. The single biggest constraint on what a drone program can cover today.

TFR

Temporary flight restriction. Airspace closed at short notice for events, VIP movement, wildfires, or incidents. Checked the day of the flight.

The pattern we see most often. Programs rarely fail on flying skill. They fail because nobody wrote the policy, only one person was qualified, the data had no retention rule, or the aircraft was funded once and never again. Every one of those is visible on this page, and every one of them is cheaper to fix now.

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Independent UAS program advisory: readiness assessment, policy and operations manual development, platform and payload selection, training standards, and program review for public agencies and commercial operators.

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