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Drone rule changes could cause spray mayhem, aviation group says, but Govt says red tape must be cut

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An aviation industry group is angry about proposed new drone rules, saying farms, the environment and public safety could be at risk.

The Government says it's slashing red tape and the changes will boost farming productivity.

Regulation Minister David Seymour said the Government received complaints about rules stopping farmers from using agricultural drones for spraying.

He said overseas farmers could already precisely spray crops using drones at a fraction of the cost Kiwi farmers had to pay.

"In Australia, drones up to 150kg operate on farmland under simple licensing."

Associate Transport Minister James Meager said changes would make agricultural drone use for spraying cheaper, faster and more efficient.

He said farmers, growers and foresters said the current certification process was cumbersome.

“Existing rules have not kept pace with the evolving technological landscape.”

He said requirements for lower-risk routine drone operations would be scrapped.

That meant people would not have to apply and wait for certification before starting work.

Meager said the existing regime meant currently, operations could languish for months and cost thousands of dollars before being approved.

Changes would cover activities such as spraying pesticides and herbicides and the distribution of fertiliser, lime, seeds and manures across cropland, pasture, orchards, vineyards, market gardens and forests.

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The changes would take effect in mid-2027, following detailed design and engagement”.

The ministers said high-risk or complex drone operations, and spraying from planes and helicopters, would stay subject to existing requirements.

The Aviation Industry Association of New Zealand (AIANZ) said it was blindsided.

Association chief executive Simon Wallace said the reforms could put public safety, the environment and other airspace users at risk.

“We want to have economic development ... but we’ve got to manage the environmental and the people risks.”

Andrew Shelley, director of drone training and consultancy provider Fenix UAS, said the reforms were not safe for the public or environment.

Shelley said current rules were far too slow and gave no guarantee of safe operation.

“However, enabling anyone to use a drone without proper training endangers public safety and creates a risk to the environment.”

Isaac Henderson, AIANZ vice-president, said changes could put neighbouring properties and public infrastructure at risk.

“Agricultural spray drones are the size of a dining room table, can travel at more than 70km/h and will almost certainly weigh more than 100kg when operating,” he said.

“What happens if a farmer operating one of these has a flyaway or system failure? That drone could strike a vehicle and result in a fatality. And who would take responsibility?”

Henderson said chemical sprays could travel for kilometres, damaging neighbouring agricultural holdings.

Tony Michelle, New Zealand Agricultural Aviation Association executive officer, said allowing untrained or poorly supervised operators was an unacceptable risk.

He said poorly managed operations could jeopardise New Zealand’s reputation for safe, high-quality primary products.

He said a national standard was urgently needed to set clear minimum requirements for issues including pilot training, competency, and chemical handling.

In April, Meager said the Government was looking at enabling drone use in agricultural operations while avoiding unnecessary compliance cost burdens.

He said at the time the [Government wanted to modernise civil aviation rules](#), enabling 20 years of changes in two years.

Those proposals covered a range of topics, not just drones, and industry groups were broadly supportive of some proposals.

But the AIANZ at the time said that although certification could be cumbersome for farmers undertaking drone operations, any rule change must still protect people and property.

Wallace said today that the industry had been working constructively with authorities for months on a fit-for-purpose regulatory package.

He said the industry group contacted the Civil Aviation Authority today raising concerns about the Government reforms.

He said the Government had presented the changes today as a fait accompli.

Wallace said the AIANZ would raise concerns with Meager at its annual conference next month, if not sooner.

"We would hope that this is not the end of it."

John Weekes is a business journalist covering aviation. He previously covered consumer affairs, crime, politics and courts.

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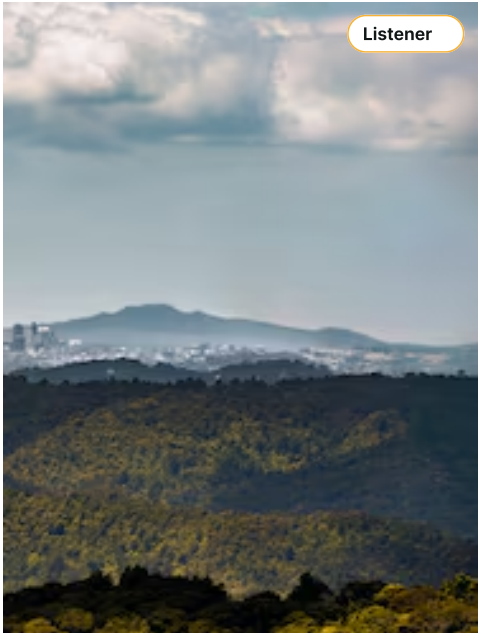
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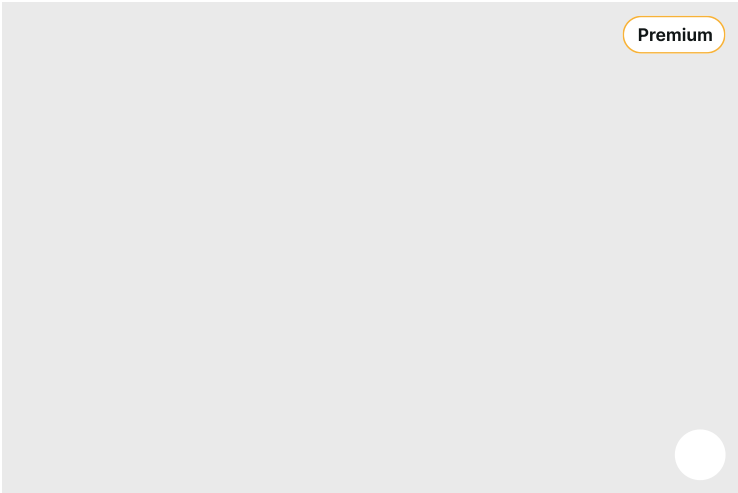
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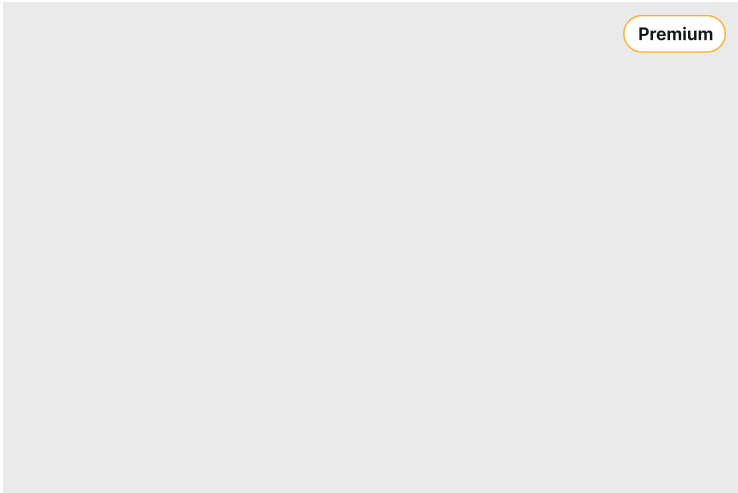
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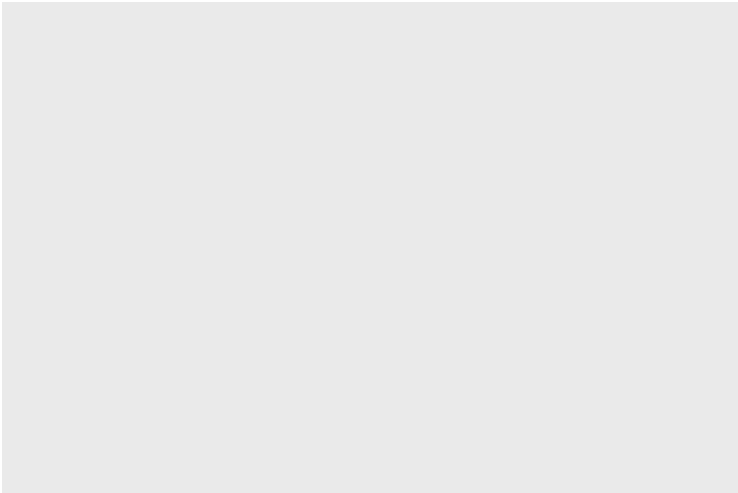
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