

COPA calls for public awareness on operation of model aircraft

By Kevin Psutka, COPA president and CEO

As technology evolves with unmanned aircraft, including sophisticated and affordable model aircraft, the potential has increased for people to create safety hazards by operating in close proximity to other aircraft.

COPA is participating in the development of regulations for Unmanned Aircraft Systems (aircraft that are flown for other than recreational purposes), the results of which are still some ways away but even when they are in place they will not apply to model aircraft.

It is very apparent with incidents like one near Vancouver airport (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFCqUixsiMM>) and another where someone just wanted to see what it is like to fly above the clouds (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfxdeRx2fLA>), this flight does not appear to be in Canada but when you read below the video the pilot's explanation of his decision to making it, illustrates the issue very well, that a public awareness campaign is required to emphasize the limits to which model aircraft can be flown and where the line is between recreational and other use of unmanned aircraft where an special flight operating certificate is required.

The current regulations regarding model aircraft were designed around relatively simply technology that necessitated keeping these aircraft within sight. Consequently, there are only two references to model aircraft in the Canadian Aviation Regulations. One is the definition of a model aircraft:

“model aircraft” means an aircraft, the total weight of which does not exceed 35 kg (77.2 pounds), that is mechanically driven or launched into flight for recreational purposes and that is not designed to carry persons or other living creatures”

And the other refers to how they may be operated:

“602.45 No person shall fly a model aircraft or a kite or launch a model rocket or a rocket of a type used in a fireworks display into cloud or in a manner that is or is likely to be hazardous to aviation safety.”

With these relatively non-specific rules and with few members of the public who purchase one of these aircraft even being aware of these regulations or what may constitute a hazard, the increasing number of incidents point to a need for action.

So, COPA raised the need for an awareness campaign with Transport Canada, suggesting that the recent initiative by the FAA to clarify what is permitted is a good start point for the effort here (http://www.faa.gov/about/initiatives/uas/media/model_aircraft_spec_rule.pdf). In particular they emphasize the need to remain within visual line of sight and what constitutes recreational use.

We have received confirmation that Transport Canada is looking into developing an educational campaign.

It will take time for Transport Canada to address this issue and get the awareness campaign out there. In the meantime, you can help protect all of us by taking action when you see something that is unsafe.

Try to intervene and point out to the individual in what way they are creating a hazard. If it is apparent that they do not care or if you cannot find the operator, such as when one is operating beyond line of sight, record as much detail as you can and report the incident to the closest regional headquarters office of Transport Canada (<http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/about-us-offices.htm>). Ask to speak with an Enforcement officer.

You should also recommend to those who you encounter that if they are not already a member of the Model Aeronautics Association of Canada (<http://maac.ca/>) they should at least seek out a local Chapter. In addition to the social and technical value of joining this group, they have the expertise on how best to safely operate these aircraft.