

[Home](#) » [Drone Laws](#) » Drone Laws in California: Detailed Guide (April 2026)

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Written By: Richard J. Gross

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If you have been paying attention to the skies above California lately, you have probably noticed something that would have seemed like science fiction just a decade ago: drones of every size and shape humming overhead, from hobbyist quadcopters capturing sunset vistas at Hermosa Beach to sophisticated commercial UAS systems conducting roof inspections in San Francisco and aerial surveys across the Central Valley. The Golden State has become one of the busiest aerial territories in America, which means understanding drone laws in California is no longer optional knowledge reserved for a niche group of aviation enthusiasts. Whether you are a recreational pilot launching a sub-250g drone from your local park or a Part 107 certified operator conducting real estate photography in Malibu, the web of federal and California-specific regulations affects every single flight you take.

California presents a uniquely complex regulatory environment for drone operators. While the Federal Aviation Administration sets the baseline rules governing all American airspace through Title 14 of the Code of Federal Regulations and various FAA orders and guidance, the state has layered on its own legislation addressing privacy, surveillance, environmental protection, and local municipal concerns that can significantly impact your operations. Add to that a patchwork of city ordinances in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Malibu, Hermosa Beach, and dozens of other municipalities, and you have a regulatory landscape that even seasoned operators find challenging to navigate without careful preparation and research before each flight.

Forum discussions among drone pilots consistently reveal that confusion about California State Parks versus California State Beaches, uncertainty about Malibu filming permit requirements, and lack of awareness regarding marine sanctuary boundaries rank among the most common pain points for operators flying within the state. Add to that questions about the 250-gram registration threshold, TRUST certification requirements for recreational pilots, and the distinction between controlled and uncontrolled airspace, and it becomes clear why many pilots feel overwhelmed when trying to operate legally in California.

This comprehensive guide breaks down everything you need to know about drone laws in California for 2026. We cover federal requirements including the Recreational UAS Safety Test (TRUST) and Part 107 certification, explain the specific California legislation including SB 807, AB 1680, AB 856, and SB 1355 that affects your flights, address municipal ordinances in major cities, clarify where you can and cannot fly across the state's diverse environments, and provide actionable steps to keep your operations compliant with all applicable rules. By the end of this article, you will have a thorough understanding of the permissions, restrictions, and best practices that govern drone flight in the Golden State.



## The Importance of Understanding Drone Laws

Before diving into the specifics of California drone regulations, it helps to understand why these rules exist in the first place. Drone laws are not arbitrary bureaucratic hurdles designed to frustrate pilots or limit the commercial potential of this emerging technology. They exist because unmanned aircraft systems present genuine risks to aviation safety, individual privacy, and public security that require structured oversight to manage effectively as the number of drones in the national airspace continues to grow exponentially year over year.

The Federal Aviation Administration estimates that drone sightings near airports have increased dramatically over the past several years, with reports spanning from routine air carrier operations to emergency medical response scenarios and firefighting operations. When a drone operates in controlled airspace near Los Angeles International, San Francisco International, San Diego International, or Sacramento International without proper authorization, it creates potential conflict with aircraft carrying hundreds of passengers and critical cargo. The 400-foot altitude ceiling, visual line of sight requirements, and airspace authorization systems like LAANC exist specifically

to prevent these dangerous interactions that could result in catastrophic accidents endangering hundreds of lives.

Privacy concerns represent another driving force behind drone regulation that is particularly relevant in California. The state has historically led the nation in establishing digital privacy protections through legislation like the California Consumer Privacy Act and the California Privacy Rights Act. Drones equipped with high-resolution cameras capable of capturing detailed imagery of individuals on private property from public airspace raise significant questions about where air rights end and privacy rights begin. The state has enacted specific statutes addressing surveillance and recording that directly impact how drone operators must conduct their flights and handle any data they collect during operations.

Public order and environmental protection round out the core reasons for drone regulation at both federal and state levels. Drones flying over active wildfire zones in Northern California or Southern California during fire season can interfere with emergency response efforts and aerial firefighting operations that are essential for protecting lives, property, and natural resources. Flying near correctional facilities raises security concerns about contraband delivery and unauthorized surveillance of security measures. Operations in sensitive ecological areas like the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, or Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary can disturb marine wildlife and fragile ecosystems that state and federal agencies work to protect. Each of these considerations has shaped the specific rules you must follow when operating a drone in California.

Understanding these foundational principles helps frame the specific regulations discussed throughout this guide. When you know why a rule exists, it becomes easier to remember and apply correctly, even in situations not explicitly covered by the regulations. Responsible drone operators internalize these principles and use them to guide decision-making in novel situations they may encounter during their flying activities across the state.

## **Understanding California's Specific Drone Laws**

California drone laws operate on multiple levels, with federal statutes and FAA regulations at the top, state legislation passed by the California legislature and signed by the governor in the middle, and local municipal codes enacted by cities and counties at the bottom. Agency-specific policies from the California Department of Parks and Recreation, Caltrans, and other state agencies also contribute to the regulatory environment. Understanding these layers requires examining each in turn and understanding how they interact with one another.

Unlike some states that defer almost entirely to federal rules, California has taken an active role in establishing additional requirements for drone operators within its borders. The state's unique combination of major metropolitan areas with complex airspace, extensive coastlines with marine sanctuaries, numerous state parks and protected areas, and a strong tradition of privacy protection

has led legislators to enact specific statutes addressing drone operations that complement federal regulations.

## **Flying Over Private Property**

Privacy concerns form the core of regulations governing drone flight over private property in California. The legal framework here involves an ongoing tension between landowner rights and air rights that has not been fully resolved by courts or legislation. Drone operators must navigate this ambiguity carefully to avoid potential liability while still being able to conduct legitimate operations.

California law does not grant explicit air rights to property owners that would prohibit all overflight at any altitude. Under existing case law, drone operators generally have the right to fly in airspace above private property, subject to federal regulations governing altitude and safe operations. However, that right is not unlimited, and several important restrictions apply to drone operations over private property.

Capturing images, videos, or other data of individuals on private property without their consent can violate California privacy laws including provisions related to intrusion upon seclusion. This means that while you may legally fly your drone over a neighbor's backyard to capture footage of your own property that extends into their airspace, deliberately recording the neighbor or their activities without their permission creates potential legal exposure under state law. The expectation of privacy in a backyard setting is generally considered reasonable, unlike a public park where individuals have diminished expectations of privacy.

The specifics matter here and operators should understand the nuances. Simply flying over private property without recording anything typically does not constitute a violation of privacy laws. But using a drone equipped with a high-resolution camera to deliberately surveil individuals on private property, capture images of activities that occur within enclosed structures visible from above, or gather data that could be used for stalking, harassment, or other improper purposes can trigger liability under California's civil and potentially criminal privacy provisions. Commercial operators conducting real estate photography or property inspections should be particularly careful to understand the boundaries of what they can legally capture and should always obtain proper consent when photographing or filming properties where individuals may appear.

## **Operating Drones in California State Parks**

One of the most persistent myths about flying drones in California involves state parks. Many operators assume that drones are categorically banned in all California State Parks and Recreation areas. This assumption leads some operators to miss legitimate flying opportunities or, conversely, to avoid parks where operations might actually be permitted. The reality is considerably more

Part 107 operations are subject to several operational restrictions that differentiate them from purely recreational flights. Drones must maintain visual line of sight with the operator at all times during flight operations, though waivers are available for certain approved operations that meet specific safety criteria. The aircraft must fly at or below 400 feet above ground level when operating in uncontrolled airspace, and operations in controlled airspace near airports require prior authorization through the LAANC system or a formal waiver request process.

Night flying became permitted under Part 107 without obtaining a separate waiver following the FAA's 2021 rule change, provided the drone is equipped with anti-collision lighting that is visible for three statute miles. This change significantly expanded commercial operating windows for drone operators who previously had to restrict their operations to daylight hours. Operations over people require adherence to specific categories of operations defined in the Part 107 rules, with different requirements depending on the drone's weight and the nature of the overflight operation.

Part 107 certificates are valid for two years from the date of issuance, after which you must pass the recurrent aeronautical knowledge test to maintain your certification without interruption. The recurrent test covers updated regulations and any changes to FAA policy that have occurred since your initial certification, ensuring that operators stay current with evolving requirements. Many operators find it helpful to set calendar reminders well in advance of their certificate expiration to allow adequate time for preparation.

Commercial drone applications in California span numerous industries and use cases that continue to expand as the technology matures and more businesses recognize the value of aerial perspectives. Real estate photographers capture stunning aerial imagery and video of properties for marketing purposes. Insurance adjusters inspect roof damage and storm damage without requiring ladders or climbing, improving safety and reducing inspection time. Construction companies monitor site progress, conduct safety inspections, and create promotional materials using drone-captured content. Agricultural operators assess crop health across large acreage to identify problem areas requiring attention. Film and television productions capture aerial footage for movies, commercials, and streaming content. Each of these use cases requires Part 107 authorization and any additional permits required by local authorities in the areas where work is conducted.

## **Remote ID Requirements for California Drone Operators**

Remote ID represents one of the most significant regulatory changes affecting drone operators in recent years. The FAA's Remote ID rule establishes a framework for broadcasting drone identification information, enabling authorities and other airspace users to identify and track drone operations in real-time. This capability is considered essential for the future integration of drones into the national airspace and for enabling advanced drone operations beyond visual line of sight.

Under current FAA regulations, drones must broadcast Remote ID information during flight operations. This information includes the drone's unique identification number assigned during registration, the operator's location at the time of flight, the drone's altitude above ground level, and a time stamp indicating when the broadcast was transmitted. The system allows law enforcement, aviation authorities, and other interested parties with appropriate receiving equipment to identify drones operating in the national airspace and obtain basic information about the operation.

Drones manufactured after December 22, 2022 must be equipped with Remote ID capability at the time of manufacture and must broadcast standard Remote ID information during all flights. Drones manufactured before that date can comply with Remote ID requirements by operating in standard Remote ID broadcast mode if the drone has this capability built in, using a Remote ID broadcast module that attaches to the drone and broadcasts the required information, or flying at FAA-recognized identification areas designated for drone operations where Remote ID is not required.

For California operators, Remote ID compliance is not optional when operating in most situations. Operating a drone without functioning Remote ID broadcast capability in airspace where it is required can result in civil penalties similar to other regulatory violations. Most modern consumer and professional drones from major manufacturers including DJI, Autel, and Skydio now include Remote ID capability as a standard feature, and firmware updates have added this capability to many older models. Operators should verify that their drones are broadcasting Remote ID information before each flight to ensure compliance with current regulations.

## **LAANC Authorization and Airspace Access**

Many parts of California airspace are controlled or otherwise restricted, requiring authorization before drone operations can legally commence. The Low Altitude Authorization and Notification Capability provides a streamlined digital pathway for obtaining real-time authorization to fly in controlled airspace without the delays associated with traditional waiver request processes.

LAANC connects directly to FAA systems to provide near-instantaneous approval for drone flights in controlled airspace, including areas near major airports throughout California. The system checks maximum allowable altitudes for specific locations based on current airspace conditions and issues authorizations accordingly. Drone operators can access LAANC through numerous approved applications including B4UFLY, AirMap, Kittyhawk, and other platforms that have integrated with the FAA system.

Using B4UFLY or a similar airspace awareness application before every flight is a practice recommended by experienced operators and echoed throughout drone pilot communities on Reddit, 3drpilots.com, and matricepilots.com. The application provides real-time information about airspace restrictions, temporary flight rules that may be in effect due to sporting events, VIP movements, or emergency operations, and authorization availability through LAANC. While LAANC handles controlled airspace near airports, B4UFLY also indicates other restricted areas and shows

where National Airspace Restrictions apply that may require additional authorization or limit operations entirely.

Some operations may require authorization beyond what LAANC can provide due to the nature of the requested operation or the specific airspace involved. In those cases, operators must submit formal waiver requests through the FAA drone portal, explaining the specific circumstances of the proposed operation and the safety mitigations that would apply. Waivers are evaluated on a case-by-case basis by FAA personnel and may be approved, denied, or approved with conditions that must be followed during operations.

For California operators, understanding which airspace you will be flying in is essential for legal compliance. The state includes major airports in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, Fresno, and numerous smaller airfields, all surrounded by controlled airspace that requires proper authorization before drone operations. Metropolitan areas like the Bay Area, Greater Los Angeles, San Diego, and Sacramento have particularly complex airspace configurations with multiple layers of controlled airspace that demand careful pre-flight planning using current charts and authorization tools.

**Also Read:** [Is Waiver to Fly Drones in Controlled Airspace Inevitable?](#)

## **Federal vs. State Laws on Drone Operation**

Drone regulation in the United States operates under a framework that balances federal authority over navigable airspace with state and local authority over land use, privacy, trespass, and related concerns that do not fall within traditional federal aviation domains. Understanding the division between these regulatory spheres is essential for California operators who must comply with both systems simultaneously.

The FAA asserts primary authority over the national airspace system based on its constitutional and statutory mandate to ensure the safety and efficiency of civil aviation. This means federal regulations govern how drones are operated in terms of altitude, location relative to airports, pilot certification, registration, and operational safety standards. These federal regulations apply uniformly across all fifty states and preempt any conflicting state or local rules on these specific federal aviation topics.

However, the FAA's authority does not extend to every aspect of drone operations. States retain authority to regulate matters like privacy, property rights, trespass, nuisance, and local concerns that do not fall under traditional aviation safety or the FAA's regulatory mandate. This creates a regulatory environment where you must comply with both federal FAA rules and applicable state

and local laws, and a single operation may trigger requirements under multiple legal frameworks simultaneously.

## Key California State Legislation

California has enacted several specific bills addressing drone operations within the state over the past decade. Understanding these statutes provides important context for legal flight operations and helps operators understand the additional requirements California places on top of federal baseline regulations.

**Senate Bill 807 (2016)** established California's framework for regulating drone operations, requiring operators to comply with FAA regulations while also establishing state-level requirements for drone use within California. The bill specifically addressed operations over critical infrastructure facilities and helped define the state's role in drone oversight alongside federal authorities.

**Assembly Bill 1680 (2016)** focused on privacy protections related to drone surveillance, prohibiting unauthorized data collection through drone operations that intrudes upon reasonable privacy expectations of individuals. The bill established important precedents for how drone-captured imagery can be used, stored, and shared under California law.

**Assembly Bill 856 (2015)** addressed commercial drone operations and filming permits, particularly in the context of entertainment industry activities and professional aerial photography. The legislation clarified permit requirements for professional aerial photography and videography conducted for commercial purposes in various California jurisdictions.

**Assembly Bill 2655** addressed drone operations near healthcare facilities, recognizing the potential for drones to interfere with medical helicopter operations at hospitals and requiring appropriate restrictions in these sensitive areas where life-saving aviation operations occur regularly.

**Senate Bill 1355** specifically prohibits drone operations near correctional facilities throughout California. Under this law, flying a drone within a certain distance of a jail, prison, or other correctional facility without explicit authorization from facility administrators constitutes a criminal offense that can result in fines and potential imprisonment. This restriction reflects legitimate security concerns about contraband delivery, surveillance of security measures, and other risks that drones could pose to correctional facility operations.

California's State Highway System has specific restrictions on drone operations that reflect the need to protect motorist safety and prevent distractions that could lead to accidents. Flying drones directly over state highway right-of-way without authorization can create hazards to motorists below and interfere with Caltrans operations and emergency response activities. If your planned flight path crosses or passes over state highway right-of-way, you may need a Caltrans encroachment permit depending on the specific circumstances, location, and nature of your operation.