

ATC Authorization Update 10/13/16

Not an official FAA publication or guidance

A good rule of thumb for Class D and E SFC airspace requests is to think of an upside down wedding cake. The layers (from airport center) are 0-2 miles, 2-3 miles, 3-4 miles, and 4-5 miles. The breakdown of those rings are as follows:

0-2 miles: currently not granting sUAS authorizations. Based on TERPS criteria and considering all runways “active”. While not impossible, if an ATC authorization request is submitted using special mitigation procedures (which wasn’t expanded upon), an authorization MAY be granted, but it will take longer.

2-3 miles: On average, sUAS operations could be granted up to 100ft AGL. You can always request higher, but it may delay or prevent you from receiving your authorization.

3-4 miles: On average, sUAS operations could be granted up to 200ft AGL. You can always request higher, but it may delay or prevent you from receiving your authorization.

4-5 miles: On average, sUAS operations could be granted up to 400ft AGL. You can always request higher, but it may delay or prevent you from receiving your authorization.

When a request is submitted, the location is plotted on the grid map and then reviewed by sUAS Air Traffic group. If the altitude is below the grid altitude (see the ‘rule of thumb’ above), the request will be granted. Air Traffic will then notify the facility and the individual requesting ATC authorization.

Air Traffic realized early on that they do not have the staffing levels to accommodate all the airspace requests (70-90 a day and getting to about 20). They realize the approval process is slow and inadequate. They are doing everything they can to speed the process up, but know it won’t be enough.

Good news (subjective, depending on your viewpoint) is that an automated solution is in the works. The FAA is in discussions with 3rd party vendors right now to develop an app specific to sUAS and ATC authorizations. The idea is that a sUAS operator will use the app, standing in the location they want to operate, and submit their request through their mobile device. The app will automatically check it against the grid and if in a ‘green’ area, will be automatically approved, in real time. If outside the ‘green’ area, the requester will be directed to the ATC authorization web portal (which many of you have used). The FAA expects to have the prototype developed in 6 months, with it going live within 12 months.

As far as the grid map is concerned, it will not be released to the general public in the short term. This is because the maps are constantly being revised. In the short term, Air Traffic is using Quality Control to try and “open up” more airspace for sUAS operations. Long term is that the grid maps will be posted to a public website.