

Farmers in the Western Cape are getting a bird's-eye view of their fields, thanks to a new industry buzzing through the province's airways.

Legislation to normalize South Africa's drone operations went into effect in mid-2015, providing a framework for the unmanned aircraft industry to get off the ground.

Cape Town's UAV Industries serves as the only training school in South Africa located outside the Gauteng province and spots in their 15-day program are filling up fast, said COO Braam Botha.



UAV Industries has already graduated eight classes of drone pilots and has another 51 students currently in training.

While the school has attracted professionals from across a number of industries, including photography and mining, it has also captured the attention of farmers from across southern Africa.

"We've seen interest as far as Namibia and across borders of farmers wanting to use the technology and wanting to access data," Botha told www.freshfruitportal.com.

"I think it adds a whole new angle and yes, even though you always have farmers who are wary about the cost, especially (with) a cost analysis against a possible increase in outputs, it makes them more effective. It completely overrides the initial cost in investment."

At ZAR26,500 (US\$1,762), drone training doesn't come cheap. With the technology at hand, however, farmers can crunch numbers and analyze inputs costs as never before.

UAV chief flight instructor Greg Donaldson said drones open up a world of technological possibilities.

"The applications we can use the technology for is increasing every day, so we get more and more interest in training every day as well," Donaldson told Eyewitness News.

"The biggest thing it does come down to is airmanship. If you've got a very reckless person, that's obviously not a good thing. So the safety, airmanship and the skills flying is really what it's about. The applications are endless. Whatever you can think of, a drone will be able to do the work."

For farmers, in addition to providing soils and nutrient analysis through aerial imaging, drones also provide the opportunity to view a year's worth of farm work from a new perspective.

"If the farmer has his own drone or has a consultant that comes by once a week, he's got the ability to build up a very nice library of how the farm changes and use it for research purposes," Botha said.

Before South Africa's drone legislation took effect last July, Botha said drones had already attracted

unofficial and unregulated operators. While many of these operators found themselves out of commission under the new legal framework, companies like UAV Industries found the opportunity to establish a safer network to train would-be pilots.

Training at UAV Industries enables students to manage air law, navigation and technical principals of flight, in preparation for licensing exams.

Beyond the know-how provided by UAV, students are also given the option to partner with the company.

South African law restricts those who can operate commercially, meaning pilots must work with an authorized entity. In the coming eight weeks, Botha expects UAV Industries to become one of four drone operators approved for commercial flight in South Africa.

Once that approval comes, UAV already has five teams established and ready to get off the ground.

In the meantime, farmers and future pilots are eager for their chance to fly.

“We’ve got a dedicated team that will be focusing on farms and we have many farmers lined up already, waiting for flight school,” Botha said.

“I do think in a lot of cases, Africa is a perfect playground because we have minimal air traffic.”

As UAV Industries and the South African industry grow, Botha said the company will be looking to expand nationally and eventually internationally.

Photos: UAV Industries

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