

FOUND MONEY

The Premium Acre Playbook

The spray work that never joined the price war. Who pays for it, the license you need and how to charge for the whole season instead of one pass at a time.

WHAT THIS IS

This is for operators tired of racing each other to the floor on \$13 corn. It walks through the work that pays more than commodity acres, who buys it, the license you need and the one pricing move that protects your whole summer. Ten minute read. Pick one lane and make one call by the end of the week.

INSIDE

- The \$400 acre and why it matters to you
- Four lanes that pay more than commodity corn
- The license stack in plain English
- How to charge for the season, not the pass
- Which lane to start with and the first calls to make

START HERE

The number that should bother you

The average drone spray rate fell to about \$13 an acre last year. It was \$21 the year before. Supply caught up, everybody undercut everybody and now half the guys flying are racing each other to the floor. Your real cost to fly is around \$7 an acre, so there's still money in it, but it shrinks every season more birds show up.

So here's the question worth your morning. Who's getting paid \$400 an acre? A guy dropping bugs.



\$400
PER ACRE

There's a company out west, M3 Agriculture Technologies, that flies sterile codling moths over apple, pear and walnut orchards. Same drone, different payload. About 800 sterile moths an acre, once a week, for a 20 week season. The moths mate with the wild ones, the eggs never hatch and the orchard stays clean with no spray.

Michigan State pegged that work at about \$400 an acre. Roughly 30 times the \$13 you're fighting over. And most operators have never heard of it.

You probably can't go drop bugs tomorrow. That runs through M3 as a partner, out in fruit country. But that's not the point. The point is this. The drone in your trailer is not a corn and bean machine unless you decide it is. The same bird and the same license open up a stack of work that never got pulled into the price war.

This guide walks you through four of those lanes. What each pays, who buys it, the license you need and the first move. Then it shows you the thing that matters more than the lane you pick, which is how you charge.

THE LANES

Work that pays more than commodity corn

Four real lanes, lined up from the easiest to start to the hardest to break into. Find the one that fits what you've already got.



The sensor jobs

\$10 to \$20
PER ACRE

WHY IT'S FIRST You're not spraying anything, so you don't need Part 137 and you don't need a pesticide license. Part 107 is all it takes. Lowest bar in this guide and the fastest to start.

WHO BUYS IT Farmers and agronomists who want stand counts and crop health maps, ag retailers and crop insurance agents who need storm or flood damage documented. Damage reports often pay a flat \$350 to \$500 a field.

THE INSURANCE ANGLE Crop insurance makes the farmer report damage fast, usually inside 72 hours. A drone map that shows the hurt acres, color-coded by how bad each zone is and tied to the field edge, is a clean record an adjuster can use. Beats walking a flooded 160 in hip waders.

FIRST MOVE Build one simple product, a same-day stand-count or health-map report priced per acre with a job minimum. Take it to the crop insurance agents and ag retailers in your county.



Cover crop seeding

\$20
PER ACRE + SEED

THE KICKER The farmer doesn't pay for the cover crop out of pocket. NRCS cost-share pays the grower \$34 to \$75 an acre to plant cover, so your seeding bill is often already covered by a government check. You don't collect that money, the farmer does, but it's the reason he'll happily pay you to fly it on.

WHY THE DRONE WINS Strap a spreader on the bird and fly rye or a cover mix into standing corn before harvest. No field traffic, no waiting on the combine. That beats the planting deadline when the ground's too wet to drill.

THE LICENSE Spreading dry seed usually isn't a pesticide job, so pure seeding needs no pesticide category. The over-55-pound exemption still applies. Many operators carry the full stack anyway because they also spray.

FIRST MOVE Walk into your county NRCS or conservation district office. Ask to be put on the list of approved cover crop applicators and ask which fall sign-ups are funded this year. Then call the farmers and get acres committed before the rush.



Specialty rows

\$18 to \$40
PER ACRE

THE MONEY Orchards, vineyards and vegetables never dropped to \$13. And these growers spray 6 to 12 times a season, so one customer is a lot of passes.

WHO BUYS IT Apple and tree-fruit growers, vineyards (especially the steep or wet blocks a tractor can't get into), almond and pistachio growers, plus blueberries, pecans, hops and potatoes. A Penn State survey found 95 percent of apple growers want to try drone spraying, mostly to reach the hillsides and tight high-density blocks an airblast rig can't touch. The terrain is your moat.

THE LICENSE Part 107, Part 137, the over-55-pound exemption and your state's ag-plant or fruit and vegetable pesticide category. California adds its own drone pilot certificate and county sign-off.

FIRST MOVE Pick the top two specialty crops in your county. Get the state extension spray guide for each, then call the grower association or co-op and offer the wet-field and hillside passes the ground rigs can't make. Lock a season deal before the first spray window.



Right-of-way & brush

~\$36
PER ACRE, YEAR-ROUND

THE DRAW Utilities, pipelines and railroads have thousands of miles of weeds and saplings to kill, a lot of it small, wet or steep ground a helicopter won't touch and a ground crew can't reach. ComEd cleared two acres of power-line right-of-way in 45 minutes on three quarters of a gallon. A ground crew needs two days and eight gallons for the same strip. Best part, it runs all year, not just in the spray window.

WHO BUYS IT Big vegetation companies like Davey, Asplundh and Wright, who hire subcontractors. County mosquito districts bid aerial work like this too, every year.

The honest part. This is the hardest lane to break into. You don't call a farmer. You get approved as a subcontractor on a vetting platform called ISNetworld and you carry heavy insurance, often a \$2 million liability policy plus a \$5 million umbrella. That takes time and money up front. Treat this as the lane you build toward, not the one you start Monday.

FIRST MOVE Get the right-of-way category on your pesticide license. Then register on ISNetworld and call the regional office of Davey, Asplundh or Wright. Tell them you can spot-spray the wet and steep spans their crews are slow on and ask for their subcontractor packet.

A FEW MORE WORTH A LOOK

Cotton defoliation (\$12 to \$20 an acre in Texas, gets a grower into harvest in 8 days instead of 16). Pond and aquatic weed work for HOAs and golf courses. Mesquite and prickly pear on ranch ground, priced by the hour for the spot stuff. All flown with the same bird.

THE PART THAT MATTERS MOST

The trick isn't the lane. It's how you charge.

The operators who climbed out of the price war didn't find a magic crop. They stopped selling single passes and started selling the season. Here's what that means and the levers that go with it.

1

Sell the season, not the pass

Lock a grower into a yearly deal in January and you protect your whole summer instead of chasing him field by field in July. Orchard and vineyard guys who sign annual contracts give up 15 to 20 percent off their walk-up rate. Sounds backwards until you do the math. You hold 15 to 20 percent more work than the guy quoting one field at a time and you know it's coming. Guaranteed acres beat a higher rate you might not get.

2

Mark up the chemical

If you supply the product, add 10 to 20 percent. That's margin you keep on top of the flying.

3

Price the rush

When tar spot hits and every plane is booked two weeks out, your value isn't a low price. It's that you can show up tomorrow. Your true cost to fly is about \$7 an acre. There's plenty of room to charge for being the one who answers the phone in the busy week.

4

Charge a setup fee and set a minimum

Broken-up or hard-to-reach fields cost you time, so a flat trip fee or a few dollars an acre on the awkward ones is fair and normal. And a 10 to 25 acre minimum on a service call keeps the little jobs from eating your day.

THE ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

Sell access, not acres. You're not the cheap sprayer. You're the one who can fly the ground nobody else can reach, on the day it has to happen and you signed the deal back in the winter.

THE PAPERWORK

What you need to fly any of this for hire

Same stack for almost everything in this guide, with one extra piece per lane. Here it is, plain.

- 1 Part 107**
Your basic FAA remote pilot certificate. If you're flying for money, you already have this.
- 2 Part 137**
The FAA's agricultural aircraft operator certificate. This is the one that lets you dispense anything from a drone, spray or seed. You apply for it and list your aircraft.
- 3 The 44807 exemption**
Only if your bird is over 55 pounds, which most spray drones are. It's the FAA's permission to fly the heavy one. Most operators in this work carry it.
- 4 Your state pesticide license, with the right category**
This is the piece that changes by lane. Ag-plant or fruit and vegetable for specialty crops. Right-of-way or vegetation for utility and brush work. Aquatic or public health for ponds and mosquitoes. The names and numbers are different in every state, so check with your state department of agriculture. Don't guess.

THE RULE THAT BEATS ALL OF THEM

Read the label. A product can only be flown if its label allows aerial or unmanned use. If it says ground only or sets a water rate your drone can't hit, that product is out, no matter the crop or who's paying. Check the label before every single job.

Two honest notes. From a standing start, getting Part 137 and your license sorted runs about four to six months, so don't wait for the busy season to begin. And the rules are getting tighter, not looser. The EPA and FAA have both signaled the easy days are ending, so keep your paperwork current and never promise a customer something is legal. Verify it yourself.

WHERE TO START

Pick your lane

Start with what you've already got. The lane gets you in the door. The way you charge is what keeps you out of the price war.

IF THIS IS YOU	START WITH
You only have Part 107 and no spray license yet.	The sensor jobs Mapping and crop-loss reports need nothing else. Be selling this month while your spray paperwork is in process.
You spray row crops and want off-season money.	Cover crop seeding One visit to the NRCS office, a spreader on the bird and fall acres committed before the rush.
You're near fruit, grapes or vegetables .	Specialty rows Best money in the guide and you already have the skill. The hillside and wet-block passes are yours alone.
You want year-round work and you'll grind through paperwork.	Right-of-way & brush Get the category, get on ISNetworld, carry the insurance. Then you've got work in every month, not just the spray window.

Whatever you pick, the pricing rules on the season page apply to all of them. Don't try to run all four at once. Get one lane paying, then add the next.

WHAT TO SAY

The first calls

Don't read these word for word. Make them yours. The point is the same every time. You can fly the ground they can't, on the day it matters and you're licensed and insured to do it.

The grower or grower association

"I'm a licensed drone applicator covering [your area]. For [apples, grapes, whatever you've got], I can get a fungicide or insecticide pass on when the ground's too wet for an airblast rig, with no wheel tracks in the crop, at about 5 to 10 acres an hour. I'd like to be on your call list for the rescue and tight-timing sprays. Can I drop off my license and references or come to your next meeting?"

The NRCS or conservation district

"I run a licensed drone operation in [your area] and I do cover crop seeding. I can fly rye or a cover mix into standing corn before harvest, no field traffic. I'd like to be added to your list of approved cover crop applicators. Which fall sign-ups are funded this year?"

The vegetation company (Davey, Asplundh, Wright)

"I'm a licensed Part 137 drone applicator based in [your county]. I do targeted herbicide spot-spray on rights-of-way and the wet or steep spans where ground crews are slow. On a recent job a drone did in 45 minutes and under a gallon what a ground crew needs two days and eight gallons for. I carry [your insurance limits] and I'm on ISNetworld. Who handles subcontractor onboarding for your [region] crews?"

WHERE THE WORK POSTS

Where to look

- **Specialty crops.** Your state extension fruit and vegetable spray guides, the state grower and wine commissions and local co-ops. That's where the growers are.
- **Cover crop seeding.** Your county USDA service center and NRCS field office (find it at farmers.gov) and your soil and water conservation district.
- **The sensor jobs.** Local crop insurance agents and ag retailers. Knock on the doors in your county.
- **Right-of-way and utility brush.** Register on ISNetworld, then contact the regional offices of Davey, Asplundh and Wright directly. The Utility Arborist Association is good for networking.
- **Government and mosquito work.** SAM.gov for federal jobs (free to register), your state purchasing portal and your county mosquito control district's bid page.

**Pick one lane. Make one call this week.
Quit fighting over \$13 corn.**

Tank Mix is the free weekly read for ag drone operators. If you spray for hire and you're not listed yet, claim your spot at agdronedirectory.com.