

DARPA Lift Challenge 2026: Rules



Last updated: July 9, 2026

Summary of Changes

Since the original posting on Oct. 28, 2025, the following changes have been made to streamline Challenge requirements.

2026	Summary of Changes
July 9	• Rule 2.1 was updated to specify that pilot certifications will be verified by the "DARPA Hangar Technician during hangar checkouts" instead of the "lane coordinator prior to flight." • Two new rules were added: ◦ 3.9 Flight Altitude: Requires the UAS to climb to and hold 150 feet (+/- 50 feet) as opposed to the previously published 150 feet. ◦ 3.9.1 Ascent/Descent Rate: Specifies that the climb to and descent from altitude must be completed within 0.5 nautical miles with a payload and 0.2 nautical miles without one. • The primary scoring metric in rule 5.1 was clarified to explicitly state that aircraft weight includes power sources.
July 2	• Updated section 1.8 to the correct USC code. • Added sections 1.1.3.2 and 6.2.1.
March 26	• Sections 1.8 and 1.9 have been added to address funding and reimbursement, as well as invitation to compete. • Updated section 6.2 to reflect specificity for either a hard or soft kill switch. • Updated sections 6.3 and 6.4 to align with currently posted FAQs and updated FAA requirements.

January 27	- Updated section 6.3. Insurance, which previously stated Teams must maintain insurance coverage. - Updated eligibility requirements to reflect a more inclusive breakdown. Please note the addition of 1.1.1.1, specifically. - Since the rules have been simplified, further details can be found in the About section on the Challenge website, as well as within the answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). - DARPA is also working with the FAA to submit a 44807 that will be distributed to teams that have applied for the Challenge in order for them to fly above 55 pounds prior to competition.
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1.0 General Rules

1.1 Eligibility: The competition is open to all teams who have applied for the DARPA Lift Challenge and meet the eligibility requirements.

1.1.1 Application and participation is open to individuals who are U.S. citizens or U.S. permanent residents (Green Card holders), representing only U.S. entities (e.g., companies, academic institutions), and government employees (civilian and military).

1.1.1.1 Non-U.S. individuals and organizations may participate as team members but must have a U.S. citizen or permanent resident as the applicant and team representative.

1.1.2 Application and participation is open to U.S. government entities (i.e. Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs), University Affiliated Research Centers (UARCs), government agencies/military institutions).

1.1.2.1 Teams from U.S. government entities may be eligible to participate provided that no government funds were previously used in the development of their design.

1.1.3 The following are eligible to participate but ineligible to receive prize money:

1.1.3.1 Individuals and non-U.S. government entities receiving funding or collaborating with DARPA on activities related to the Challenge.

1.1.3.2 Teams from U.S. government entities that are participating in their official capacity, or federal employees acting within the scope of their federal employment are ineligible to receive the award in their personal or individual

capacities. Any award won by such participants must either be officially accepted by their employer or forfeited.

1.1.4 The following are ineligible applicants and participants:

1.1.4.1 DARPA government employees and support contractors, including their spouses, dependents, and members of their household.

1.1.4.2 Citizens of countries on [the Department of State's International Traffic in Arms Regulations restricted list](#)

1.1.5 To be eligible to win a monetary prize, a team representing an entity (e.g., company or academic institution) must be incorporated and maintain a primary place of business (e.g., located) in the United States. A team not representing an entity, must include a citizen or permanent resident of the United States. The winner will be required to provide a U.S. Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) or a Social Security number (SSN) to receive the monetary prize. Information on how to obtain a TIN is available on the [U.S. Internal Revenue Service website](#).

1.1.6 **Team applicant definition:** A team applicant is defined as one or more individuals, identified by a Social Security number (SSN) or Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN).

1.1.6.1 **One aircraft design per team:** Each team can submit only one aircraft design for evaluation. Teams may bring spare parts or identical copies of their aircraft model to the competition.

1.1.6.2 **Multiple designs require separate teams:** To submit multiple, distinct aircraft designs, you must apply as a separate team for each design.

1.1.6.3 **No duplication to gain advantage:** Teams or groups of teams connected through common members, funding sources, or organizational affiliation may not submit applications for multiple teams with the same design concept to gain additional flight windows or other competitive advantages. DARPA reserves the right to disqualify teams found to be in violation of this rule.

1.2 **Compliance:** All applicants must comply with these rules, as well as all applicable Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations and safety standards.

1.3 **Safety:** Safety is paramount. Any unsafe behavior or violation of these rules will result in immediate disqualification.

1.4 **Interpretation:** DARPA reserves the right to interpret these rules and make decisions on any matters not specifically covered herein. All DARPA decisions are final.

1.5 **Amendments:** DARPA reserves the right to amend these rules at any time. Any amendments will be communicated, in writing, to all applicants.

1.6 Good Faith: All applicants are expected to compete in good faith and to conduct themselves in a sportsmanlike manner.

1.7 Disqualification: DARPA reserves the right to immediately disqualify applicants from the Challenge for violating the rules and/or failing to compete in good faith.

1.8 Funding and reimbursement: DARPA is authorized under 10 USC § 4025 to conduct the Challenge and award cash prizes. However, DARPA will not provide funding or reimburse competitors any costs incurred to design, develop, construct, or operate the UAS.

1.8.1 Participation in the Challenge is voluntary, and teams assume responsibility for the costs and risks associated with developing and operating their systems.

1.8.2 While DARPA will not directly fund participating teams, the Challenge website will include a [Contributor Portal](#) to help teams connect with businesses, organizations, and individuals interested in providing voluntary support. Such support may include financial contributions, partnerships, or in-kind resources. This portal is intended to foster collaboration and resource sharing, and to help teams identify potential external support to overcome resource constraints in their Challenge efforts.

1.9 Invitation to Compete: Submission of required materials and meeting technical and safety milestones, including the May 15 flight test verification, are important steps for the competition process. However, meeting these milestones does not guarantee that a team will receive a formal invitation to compete in the Challenge in August 2026.

1.9.1 Milestone and deliverables are intended to allow teams to demonstrate progress toward a flight-ready system and to assist DARPA in evaluating readiness, safety considerations, and compliance with the Challenge Rules.

1.9.2 To be considered for an invitation to compete, teams must satisfy all eligibility, safety, and operational requirements described in the Rules and Competitor's Guide. DARPA welcomes innovative technical approaches and appreciates the commitment teams make in pursuing advanced heavy-lift concepts. However, participation in the Challenge does not create any obligation for DARPA to invite a team to compete.

2.0 Team Requirements

2.1 Remote Pilot in Command (RPIC): Each team must designate an RPIC who holds a valid FAA Part 107 remote pilot certificate. These certifications must be provided to DARPA in order to be considered for invitation to compete, as well as verified with the DARPA Hangar Technician during Hangar checkouts.

2.2 Visual Observer (VO): Each team is allowed to designate a visual observer to accompany the RPIC behind the RPIC safety barrier adjacent to the flight lane.

3.0 Aircraft Requirements

3.1 Weight Limit: The Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS), including all components and fuel (excluding the payload), must weigh less than 55 pounds at the time of weigh-in.

3.2 Vertical Takeoff and Landing (VTOL): The UAS must take off and land vertically. No rolling or sliding starts.

3.3 Visual Line of Sight (VLOS): All flights must be conducted within visual line of sight of the remote pilot in command (RPIC).

3.4 Remote Identification (RID): The UAS must comply with all FAA Remote Identification (RID) requirements.

3.5 FAA compliance: All UAS operations must comply with applicable FAA regulations, including a commercial Part 107 ("Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems") certification for operations <55 pounds. For operations above 55 pounds, we have worked with the FAA to have DARPA hold the PART 107 waiver which has been distributed to teams that have been selected to compete.

3.6 Construction: The UAS must be of sound design and construction, capable of safely carrying the specified payload.

3.7 Heavier than air: The UAS must be a heavier-than-air aircraft. The use of any lighter-than-air gases to provide buoyant lift is strictly prohibited. Teams may use chemically inert gases for subsystem actuation, safety inerting, and component rigidity, provided that there is no buoyant advantage and the gas is contained in components operating at pressures indicative of mechanical function.

3.8 Depleted power: You can jettison non-structural parts of the aircraft (i.e., expended energy storage), but they must have a slow decent and have hi-resolution marking for easy retrieval.

3.9 Flight Altitude: Once airborne, the UAS must climb to and maintain a cruising altitude of 150 feet, with a tolerance of +/- 50 feet.

3.9.1 Ascent/Descent Rate: The ascent to and descent from the designated cruising altitude must be completed within 0.5 nautical miles of the start/finish zone when carrying a payload, and within 0.2 nautical miles when flying without a payload.

4.0 Payload Requirements

4.1 Payload composition: The payload will consist exclusively of commercially available Barbell Standard brand cast iron Olympic barbell gym plates. Acceptable plate weights are: 2.5 pounds, 5 pounds, 10 pounds, 25 pounds, 35 pounds, and 45 pounds. Plates will be circular and of standard dimensions for their weight. All plates for the Challenge will be provided by DARPA to ensure uniformity across the competition.

4.2 Payload weight: 110 pounds is the minimum payload weight to receive a qualifying score. Teams may attempt flights with any payload weight they choose, up to the maximum capacity of their UAS. The payload weight must be declared prior to weigh-in.

4.3 Plate combination: The payload must be assembled using the largest plate combinations available. For example, a 30-pound payload must consist of one 25 lb. plate and one 5 lb. plate (not six 5-pound plates).

4.4 Payload location: All plates comprising the payload must be co-located at a single point on the UAS. Distributed payloads or using the payload as structural reinforcements are not permitted.

4.5 Attachment method: Teams are free to use any method to attach the payload to the UAS (e.g., sling load, direct attachment). However, the attachment method must be secure and not pose a safety hazard. The attachment method will also be weighed in and will be considered part of the aircraft, not payload weight. The attachment method must remain attached or be reattached to the aircraft during the last nautical mile of the flight path.

4.6 No modifications: The gym plates themselves cannot be modified in any way (e.g., drilling holes, adding attachment points, etc.).

5.0 Scoring

5.1 Primary metric: The primary metric is the maximum payload weight divided by the aircraft weight (including power sources) that has successfully completed the flight course.

5.2 Tiebreaker: In the event of a tie, the team with the fastest time will be declared the winner.

5.3 Flight windows: Each team will be assigned two 90-minute flight windows during the evaluation period.

5.4 Flight attempts: Teams may complete as many successful attempts during their flight window as possible. The highest score of the flight window will be submitted for review at the end of each flight window. The highest overall score for a team will be maintained throughout the competition.

5.5 Scheduling changes: The flight schedule is subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances, such as teams dropping out of the competition or UAS crashes during testing. DARPA will make every effort to accommodate teams and provide reasonable notice of any scheduling changes.

5.6 Missed flight window: If a team is unable to fly during their scheduled flight window, they may forfeit their attempts. DARPA may, at its discretion, offer an alternate flight window, but this is not guaranteed. Team check-in will be required within 15 minutes of event window start time.

5.7 Rescheduling: Teams may contact DARPA to reschedule their window if they have a valid reason. DARPA will attempt to accommodate the request.

6.0 Safety Requirement

6.1 Emergency procedures: Teams must have established emergency procedures in place in the event of a UAS malfunction or another unforeseen event.

6.2 Kill switch: Teams must have a readily accessible "kill switch" that can immediately shut down the UAS in the event of an emergency. This can be a hard or soft kill switch.

6.2.1 UAS's that fly beyond the specified boundaries of the competition are subject to active engagement by security and may be damaged or destroyed.

6.3 Insurance: While not mandatory, teams are strongly encouraged to obtain appropriate liability insurance to cover risks associated with flight operations, testing, transportation, and participation in the event.

6.4 Aircraft registration: Teams must provide proof of FAA DroneZone registration to a DARPA representative during Hangar checks.

7.0 Protest Procedure

7.1 Filing a protest: Any team may file a protest if they believe that another team has not followed these procedures.

7.2 Protest deadline: Protests must be filed within 24 hours of the alleged violation.

7.3 Protest resolution: DARPA will investigate all protests and make a final written determination.