

DARPA Lift Challenge 2026: Timeline & Milestones



These dates were updated on Jan. 26, 2026, to reflect the latest schedule and deadlines for team deliverables for the first Lift Challenge.

Phase 1 | Launch

October 2025

- **Special Notice publishing (Oct. 23):** DARPA publishes a Special Notice to broadly announce the Lift Challenge and solicit innovative design concepts.
- **Website launches (Oct. 23):** DARPA publishes a Special Notice to broadly announce the Lift Challenge and solicit innovative design concepts.
- **Rules and prize announcement (Oct. 23):** Detailed draft rules and prize structure are announced, specifying objective and subjective judging criteria.

December 2025

- **Online Q&A (Dec. 4):** DARPA [hosts online Q&A session\(s\)](#) to address potential participants' questions and clarify challenge requirements.
- **Contributor portal launches (Dec. 22):** Competitors who require additional resources to enhance their drone designs [may voluntarily use the portal](#) to identify potential partners to meet their needs.

Phase 2 | Design and Build

January 2026

- **Application window opens (Jan. 5):** Formal application period opens, allowing interested teams to officially propose a design for the competition.
- **FAA certification submission begins (Jan. 5):** Teams begin to [submit their Part 107 pilot certification](#).
- **Draft concept paper submission (Jan. 31):** Teams [submit a draft concept paper](#) outlining their proposed UAS design, technical approach, and key performance metrics for consistent engagement throughout design. | [See template](#)

March 2026

- **Build progress picture submission (March 31):** Teams to [submit to DARPA progress picture\(s\) of the building of their aircraft](#) to ensure consistent engagement.

Spring 2026

- **FAA waiver approval:** DARPA will distribute a copy of the approved waiver to all teams electronically following approval from the FAA.

May 2026

- **Application window closes (May 1):** Formal application period closes.
- **Final concept paper submission (May 1):** Aircraft design is complete, and analysis and information are ready for review. | [See template](#)
- **FAA certification approval (May 1):** All approved FAA Part 107 certifications [must be submitted to DARPA](#) by the application window close in Phase 2 prior to Formal Team Invitation to Compete.
- **Flight test verification (May 15):** Teams will submit a video demonstrating measurable progress toward a flight-ready system. | [See guidance](#)

Phase 3 | Competition and Evaluation

June 2026

- **FAA certification approval (June 4):** All approved FAA Part 107 certifications [must be submitted to DARPA](#) by the application window close in Phase 2 prior to Formal Team Invitation to Compete.
- **Flight test verification (June 4):** Teams will submit a video demonstrating measurable progress toward a flight-ready system. | [See guidance](#)
- **Formal team invitation to compete (June 5):** All teams have completed any pre-qualifications needed at this point for their design. DARPA will formally invite teams that have met all eligibility requirements and announce challenge schedule to include assigned flight windows.

August 2026

- **Check-in, weigh-in, and inspection (Aug. 2):** A comprehensive weigh-in and systems inspection process will take place to document the details of the aircraft.
- **Challenge run through (Aug. 2-9):** Teams will compete across multiple flight windows to achieve an eligible score. 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.
- **Challenge completion (Aug. 9):** The challenge week concludes with an awards ceremony recognizing the top performers in both objective and subjective categories. A panel of DARPA experts will judge the final subjective winners for the competition.

Editor's notes:

- On April 30, 2026, we updated the flight test verification milestone description to reflect added flexibility to submission requirements
- The FAA certification Flight Test Verification and deadlines (originally May 1 and 15, respectively) were updated to June 4 on May 20, 2026

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