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Access Air reports on crash probe – Friday, November 5th, 2004

By DAVE WOODSON - Staff Writer

ELKO - Mechanical problems did not contribute to the Aug. 21 Access Air Ambulance helicopter crash that claimed the lives of five people, according to initial findings by the National Transportation Safety Board.

"They have initially ruled out any mechanical failures," Jim Hutchens, president and owner of Access Air Ambulance, told Elko County Commissioners Wednesday. "They indicated it (the helicopter) was in level flight under power."

The helicopter was manned by pilot Roger Morrison, flight nurse Lisa Landers and flight paramedic Todd Hellman. The two passengers were Alicia Preston-Crum and her 11-day-old daughter, Deanna Preston-Crum of Battle Mountain.

Investigation by the Pershing County Sheriff's office indicated that the deadly accident happened at about 11:30 p.m. near the Pershing-Humboldt County line about 25 miles south of Battle Mountain.

"The NTSB indicated to me that the aircraft hit the side of the mountain near Mount Tobin at just a little over 8,600 feet, 75 feet below the rim of the mountain," Hutchens said. "And that is all they would tell me."

The air ambulance was en route from Battle Mountain to Reno at the time of the crash.

Hutchens said it would probably be 18 months to two years before the NTSB completed a final written report detailing the cause of the accident.

"They investigate 1,100 or 1,200 accidents a year worldwide, so it is a slow process," he said.

Hutchens said he could not further elaborate because of the emotional nature of the situation and lawsuits that will take years to resolve.

"Speculation in these matters always hurt the people that are still alive, especially the family members," Hutchens said.

He said he planned to install the new helicopter with a night vision goggle system "which would allow us to have literally 20-20 vision at night," Hutchens said. "Odds are this accident would not have happened if we had had that system."

He said he had already ordered the goggles but the expense was in aircraft equipment modifications to be compatible with use while wearing the night vision system.

Hutchens said several of the mines had agreed to hold fund-raisers toward offsetting some of the anticipated \$100,000 cost for the modifications.

Hutchens said in the aftermath of the accident there have been financial repercussions for Access Air.

"It has been difficult," he said. "From a business standpoint, it was a setback."

He asked the county board if it would be possible for financial assistance, noting that in the four years that Access Air has served Elko County that it has provided more than \$4 million in free flights for the county's indigent population.

"We would like you to consider a monthly or a yearly subsidy to help us get back on our feet or something else that you might think of that I can't," Hutchens said.

The county board took the request under advisement.

Hutchens said the helicopter was insured and the company will recover the total value, except for an \$80,000 deductible.

Hutchens said the medical equipment that was lost in the accident was insured for about \$100,000 and Access Air accepts a depreciated value of about half that from the insurance company.

"We were out of business for 30 days," he said.

Hutchens thanked the county board for its quick responses in extending the clause in the contract that allowed the company more than 30 days to recover from the loss of its aircraft, and said they had a loner helicopter up in the air within that time frame.

However, he said the company planned to purchase another helicopter.

"What we would like to do is purchase another helicopter of equal capability of what we lost," Hutchens said. "Right now we have a helicopter down here temporarily that is not as powerful and not as fast and not as expensive."

Hutchens said it would cost about \$1.5 million to purchase a Bell 407 helicopter.

He said above the initial \$2 million investment to get the air ambulance service started the company had also developed a \$550,000 line of credit.

"Our line of credit now is down to about \$430,000" Hutchens reported.

He said the line of credit was being paid down at about \$5,000 a month.

"So you can do the math; it will be a long time before anybody takes any money home that is invested in this program," Hutchens said.

He said an air ambulance service was costly to run.

"That business runs between \$100,000 and \$120,000 a month whether we fly or not," Hutchens said. "There are a lot of personnel and a lot of expensive equipment."