



## Board cites poor weather in helicopter crashes

By JOAN LOWY – 3 days ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal safety investigators say flying at night in poor weather conditions contributed to three medical helicopter crashes in which 12 people died.

The National Transportation Safety Board blamed a fourth crash in Alabama on flying too low over trees as the EMS helicopter searched for a lost hunter. The pilot, a paramedic and a flight nurse were killed.

The board released the probable cause of the four crashes and information on five others Thursday. Together, 35 people were killed in nine EMS helicopter crashes since December 2007.

The three nighttime crashes in which poor weather was a factor took place near Whittier, Alaska; Huntsville, Texas, and South Padre Island, Texas.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information. AP's earlier story is below.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three years ago, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended warning systems be installed on emergency medical helicopters to prevent crashes. Since then, accidents have killed more than three dozen people and installation of the equipment still is not required.

On Thursday, the safety board was to disclose new information on the nine most recent fatal crashes, including the probable cause of four of the accidents. The board has also scheduled a four-day hearing in early February to give the issue greater visibility and urgency.

"It is a big issue and the safety board is very concerned about the alarming increase we've seen over the last 14 months," said board member Robert Sumwalt, who will chair the hearings. "The recent accident record is totally unacceptable."

EMS helicopter accidents are not a new issue for the board. Between January 2002 and January 2005, there were 55 crashes of EMS helicopters and planes, killing 54 and seriously injuring 19. Seventeen of those crashes might have been avoided if the helicopters had had Terrain Awareness Warning Systems onboard, according to the safety board. The technology, which is used aboard commercial jetliners, warns pilots when the aircraft is on course to fly into the ground — usually in bad weather with limited visibility.

In January 2006, the safety board recommended four steps the Federal Aviation Administration should take to prevent future crashes, such as requiring the installation of terrain warning systems.

For two years after the board made its recommendations, EMS helicopter-accident fatalities dropped significantly. There were two helicopter accidents with four fatalities in 2006, and two accidents with seven fatalities in 2007.

But in the first 10 months of last year, there was a dramatic increase — seven accidents resulting in 28 fatalities. And none of the safety board's four recommendations had yet been fully implemented.

The board responded by adding the four recommendations to its "most wanted list" of safety improvements, red-flagging the FAA's progress on three of them as "unacceptable," and scheduling the upcoming hearing.

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said federal rulemaking can be a lengthy process, but in the meantime the agency has taken steps to encourage the industry to voluntarily adopt safety improvements.

"The main goal is to get the technology and procedures into the cockpit," Dorr said. "Rulemaking is one way, but it is not the only way."

The EMS industry "acknowledges that the current accident rate is not acceptable," said Sandy Kinkade, president of the Association of Air Medical Services in Alexandria, Va.

She blamed the holdup in adding terrain-warning systems to helicopters on a combination of

technology hurdles and delays in the FAA's issuance of a technical standards for warning systems designed for helicopters.

When NTSB made its recommendation there was no warning system for helicopters, and the systems designed for airplanes — which fly at much higher altitudes than helicopters — were "constantly pinging" when tried on helicopters, Kinkade said.

EMS companies were also wary of installing new systems that have since been designed for helicopters until FAA had issued technical standards, fearing they'd invest in systems that might later fail to meet FAA regulations, said Dawn Mancuso, the association's executive director.

The FAA finally issued the technical standards last month, but the agency has yet to propose a rule requiring installation of the warning systems. A final rule and time for implementation makes it likely that a date for requiring EMS helicopters to have the equipment onboard is still years away, Sumwalt said.

On the Net:

- National Transportation Safety Board: <http://www.nts.gov/>