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Feds Shed Light on EMS Chopper Crashes

By JOAN LOWY

,
AP

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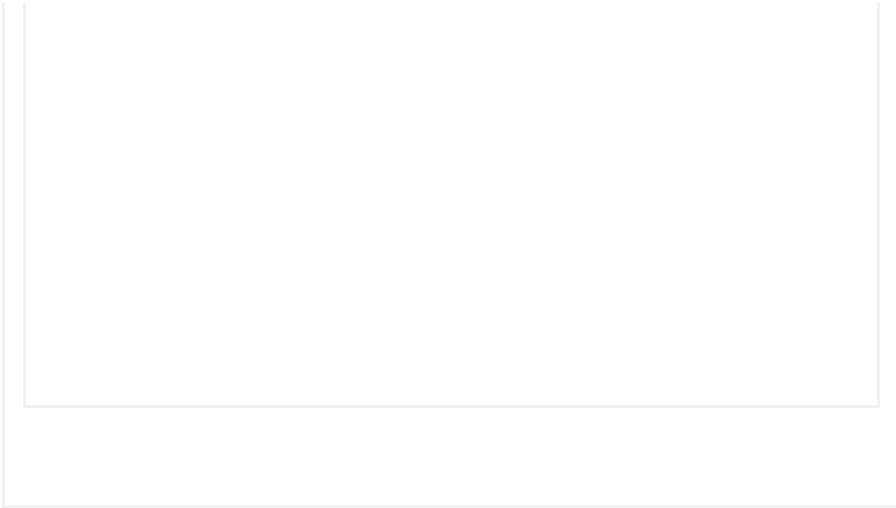
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WASHINGTON (Jan. 15) - Federal safety investigators said Thursday that flying at night in poor weather conditions contributed to three medical helicopter crashes that killed 12 people.

The National Transportation Safety Board blamed a fourth crash on Dec. 30, 2007 near Cherokee, Ala., 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.

A Record Year for Accidents



Paul Beaty, AP

9 photos

The first 10 months of 2008 saw seven medical helicopter accidents and 28 deaths, despite safety recommendations aimed at preventing such crashes. A medical helicopter carrying a 13-month-old girl crashed in October in Aurora, Ill., killing the young patient and three crew members. Here, a part of the helicopter blades lies in the grass.

(Note: Please disable your pop-up blocker)

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

Three years ago, the board recommended all EMS helicopters be equipped with Terrain Awareness Warning Systems. The technology, which is used aboard commercial jetliners, warns pilots who can't see where they're heading when the aircraft is on course to fly into the ground.

Since then, more than three dozen people have been killed in EMS helicopter accidents and installation of the equipment still is not required by the Federal Aviation Administration. Other safety recommendations included more formal procedures for evaluating the risks of making an emergency medical flight, particularly at night and in poor weather, and for obtaining up-to-date weather information. Those recommendations have not been fully implemented either.

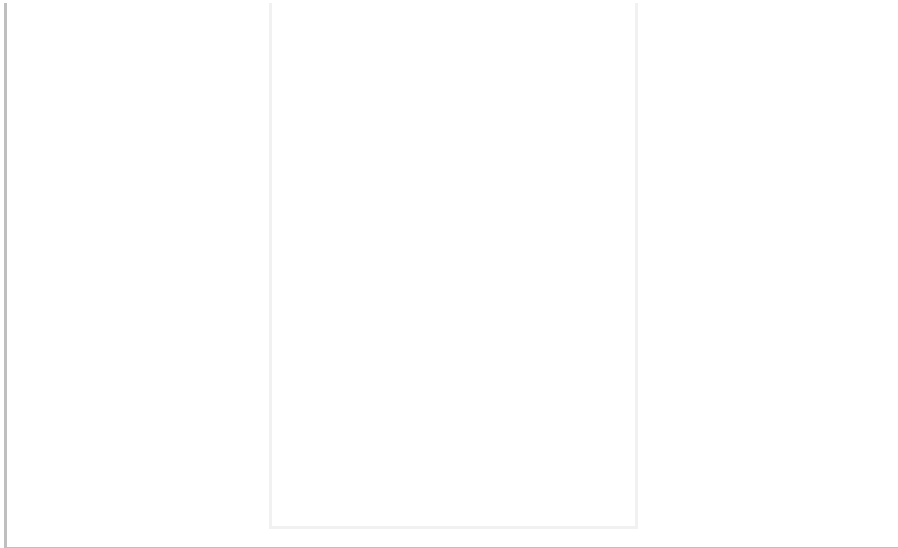
The board has scheduled a four-day hearing in early February to give the issue greater visibility and urgency. "It is a big issue and the safety board is very concerned about the alarming increase we've seen over the last 14 months," said board member Robert Sumwalt, who will chair the hearings. "The recent accident record is totally unacceptable."

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said putting requirements in place can be a lengthy process, but in the meantime the agency has taken several 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."

Recent Air Accidents





Mario Tama, Getty Images

24 photos

US Airways 1549 went down in the Hudson River off New York City on Jan. 15 after the Airbus 320 collided with a flock of birds, disabling both engines. The pilot decided to ditch the crippled airliner in the frigid Hudson. All 155 people on board survived.

(Note: Please disable your pop-up blocker)

The three nighttime crashes in which poor weather was a factor took place:

-- Three miles east of Whittier, Alaska, on Dec. 3, 2007. The helicopter, transporting a patient from a remote medical clinic to a hospital in Anchorage, probably met snow squalls and low visibility as it flew over the ocean, the board said.

"With the pilot unable to discern either the shore or the ocean, it is probable he flew the helicopter under control into the ocean," investigators said in their report. Of the four people onboard, only one body has been recovered.

-- In the Sam Houston National Forest south of Huntsville, Texas, on June 08, 2008. The helicopter had picked up a hospital patient for transport to another hospital — a mission another EMS pilot had aborted only an hour and a half earlier due to poor visibility. The board cited the pilot's failure "to identify and arrest the helicopter's descent" before crashing as the primary cause of the accident, adding that fog, clouds and other conditions requiring navigation by instruments alone also contributed. The pilot, a flight nurse, a paramedic and a patient were killed.

-- Near South Padre Island, Texas, on Feb. 5. The helicopter, en route to pick up a patient at a convention center parking lot, was turning over Laguna Madre when it suddenly plunged into the shallow bay. The pilot's failure to maintain control of the helicopter was cited as the primary cause of the crash, but dark night conditions and the pilot's lack of experience flying in poor weather requiring navigation solely by instruments were also factors, the board said. The pilot, two medical workers and a patient were killed.

The flight 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.

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Graber4543

03:49 PM Jan 16 2009

They already have a terrain awareness system. It is called an altimeter.

AVG RATING: (0) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)

Vb23462

12:13 AM Jan 16 2009

I have been a paramedic for over 20 years and a pilot for over 30 years. Terrain avoidance equipment will not prevent most of these accidents. Poor decisions made by the pilots who often have low time and little actual instrument experience are the primary cause. Being under pressure from their companies to make the flight and collect that revenue is another major issue. Also many exhibit wreckless flying at altitudes much lower enroute than necessary striking bridges and towers as well as mountains.. How the feds have not put a stop to this years ago is beyond me. This is an industry totally out of control. We are supposed to save lives not take them. There is no way this industry will self regulate and all the equipment in the world is not going to stop this.

AVG RATING: (0) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)

Qball849

11:23 PM Jan 16 2009

Its all about the money

AVG RATING: (1) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**Domresc**

11:06 PM Jan 16 2009

I have 30 years aviation experience flying helicopters and jets. The EMS companies refuse to pay for experienced pilots. The average pay for a helicopter EMS pilot is about 60,000 a year. Most start around 50,000 and max out around 70,000 after many years experience. Compare that to airline pilots that have an easier and safer job but make over a 100,000 a year.

AVG RATING: (1) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**TJFoster965**

09:04 PM Jan 16 2009

You can't teach someone how to fly a helicopter and give them a job that involves hazardous conditions a month later. You need a boatload of hours in a plane before you can become a commercial pilot.

AVG RATING: (1) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**TrollId1**

08:52 PM Jan 16 2009

I still would like to remember the e-vac ride I got in 1997 when the emt's called me at the scene of a near fatel. \$3,500 worth not a bad deal for another chance to live.

AVG RATING: (1) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**Marksmant02**

08:28 PM Jan 16 2009

This won't make any difference unless there is some money to be made by "Corporate America".

AVG RATING: (4) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**ShakenLadySyn**

08:12 PM Jan 16 2009

Now that they've figured it out, I hope it makes a difference.

AVG RATING: (0) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)**tcptools**

07:42 PM Jan 16 2009

Flying helecopters at night in bad weather is risky business. You need months of training to use night vision to fly with. Depth perception problems. Also medivac is not a non profit business. If I needed it I would want it though. Time is the enemy after an accident, not the helicopter. These pilots take this job very personally. They risk their lives to save others.

AVG RATING: (4) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)

AVG RATING: (1) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)

Lobo0351

07:15 PM Jan 16 2009

i recently heard that the faa has now approved a night vision device like the military ones for civilian pilots. i hope this is an option for safer flying.

AVG RATING: (0) [REPORT!sign-in to rate](#)

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