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NTSB seeks fixes to air-ambulance safety

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By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Federal accident investigators on Tuesday charged that the air-ambulance industry and its regulators have moved too slowly to halt the spate of accidents that made 2008 the deadliest year in emergency medical helicopter history.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) voted for the first time to put safety enhancements for air-ambulance flights on its annual "Most Wanted" list of suggested improvements. Nine air-ambulance helicopters have crashed since last December, killing 35 people.



Enlarge By Ross D. Franklin, AP

Investigators survey the damage left by the crash of two helicopters June 30 in Flagstaff, Ariz.

The NTSB in January 2006 urged the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to make air-ambulance flights subject to more stringent operating rules, require companies to address possible risks before each flight and install devices that warn pilots in danger of accidentally striking the ground or other obstructions.

Although progress has been made on some of the issues, none have been fully put in place, said Jeffrey Guzzetti, deputy director of the NTSB's aviation division.

"We need to put the foot down to the pedal. People are dying," NTSB board member Debbie Hersman said.

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"There needs to be a sense of urgency. The fatalities are going up and up," Hersman said.

Most of the recent accidents follow trends that investigators spotted in their 2006 study of the industry's problems. Crashes tend to occur at night, in poor visibility or in bad weather, Guzzetti said. The NTSB's recommendations had the potential to cut more than half of the 55 accidents studied in 2006.

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said the agency agrees with the need for safety enhancements. He said the FAA has focused on encouraging voluntary action because it can be put in place quickly.

The agency is also "moving ahead with plans to require the NTSB recommendations in part or in whole," Dorr said.

The NTSB also urged aviation regulators to write comprehensive rules requiring that pilots and controllers get adequate rest. In addition, the safety board took up the issue of cellphone use for the first time. The NTSB urged that federal highway regulators to prohibit bus drivers from using cellphones while driving.

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Dar wrote: 10/28/2008 11:32:03 PM

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