

Subject: NTSB Press Release

Safety board targets medical helicopter crashes

By JOAN LOWY

WASHINGTON (AP) — Responding to a spate of fatal emergency medical helicopter accidents, a federal safety panel said Tuesday aviation officials are not acting quickly enough on proposals to prevent crashes.

The five-member National Transportation Safety Board in January 2006 urged the Federal Aviation Administration to take a series of steps to improve the safety of EMS helicopter flights.

At a meeting Tuesday, the safety board acknowledged that the FAA is working on the proposals, but not quickly enough. Over the past 11 months, nine emergency medical helicopters have crashed, killing 35 people.

"We need to put the foot down to the pedal here — people are dying," safety board member Debbie Hersman said.

The board, which has no power to force the FAA to adopt its recommendations, voted unanimously to elevate the recommendations to its annual list of top safety priorities.

FAA spokesman Les Dorr said the agency has "worked extensively and aggressively with EMS helicopter operators to improve safety and to adopt better safety procedures and technology."

The board's four recommendations include:

- _ Require EMS helicopter operators to install Terrain Awareness Warning Systems (TAWS) on helicopters. The system warns pilots when helicopters are in danger of crashing into the ground, mountains and some buildings.

Safety board staff said several of the recent fatal crashes might have been prevented if the helicopters had had TAWS. They also said EMS operators could install TAWS now, but operators have told the board they're waiting for the FAA to act.

- _ Require EMS flights that carry only medical personnel to follow the more stringent safety rules that apply to flights carrying patients and organs for donation. Of 55 emergency medical helicopter or plane crashes between January 2002 and January 2005, 10 crashes involved transporting medical personnel only and could have been prevented if the more stringent rules had been followed, the board said.

- _ Require a formal flight risk evaluation before an EMS flight. Fifteen of the 55 crashes could have been prevented if such an evaluation had been made before takeoff, the board said.

- _ Require EMS flights to use formalized dispatch procedures that include up-to-date weather information and assistance in flight risk-assessment decisions.

Last month, the pilot of an EMS helicopter struggled in darkness and fog while transporting victims from a car accident in Maryland. After the pilot radioed he was going to attempt to land, the helicopter crashed into a woodsy hillside in a suburban park, killing four of five occupants.

Maryland emergency officials have said that when the helicopter initially took off, there was seven miles of visibility. By the time of the crash, however, conditions had deteriorated to the point that the pilot had to rely on instruments to help him land.

The most recent medical helicopter crash occurred earlier this month in Aurora, Ill., when an Air Angels flight clipped a radio tower guy wire. All four people aboard — three crew members and a 1-year-old patient — were killed.