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National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: June 19, 1995

In reply refer to: A-95-67

Mr. Bob DeCamp
President
Hawaii Helicopter Operators Association
120 Kapalulu Place
Suite 214
Honolulu, Hawaii 96819

The National Transportation Safety Board recently conducted a special investigation of the U.S. air tour industry¹. This investigation resulted from the Safety Board's longstanding concern about air tour accidents and incidents, 139 of which were investigated by the Board between October 1, 1988, and April 1, 1995. Although several safety enhancing actions have been taken, these actions have been site specific and only partially addressed the Safety Board's concerns.

The special investigation was initiated on July 14, 1994, after two accidents involving air tour operations occurred in Hawaii. While the Safety Board has determined that the probable causes of these accidents were mechanical and operational, respectively, investigation of the accidents revealed areas of concern applicable to the national air tour industry. Based on those findings, the history of accidents involving air tour operators, and the previous related safety recommendations, the Safety Board conducted public hearings during the week of October 10, 1994, in Phoenix, Arizona, and Honolulu, Hawaii, to obtain the views of those persons and organizations that directly participate in the air tour industry.

One issue discussed at the public hearing in Hawaii was the issue of minimum stand-off distances for helicopters during air tours. Section 6 of SFAR 71, which regulates the Hawaii air tour industry, prohibits flight below 1,500 feet above the ground, closer than 1,500 feet to any person or property, or below any altitude prescribed by other regulations. This restriction applies to both fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. Operators testifying at the Hawaii hearing were ardently against this restriction. The operators claim that this limitation will force what was once dispersed air tour traffic to converge at an altitude of 1,500 feet, flying fewer routes with sufficient terrain clearance. Flights that were previously spread out within canyons will now be

¹For more detailed information, read Special Investigation Report--"Safety of the Air Tour Industry in the United States" (NTSB/SIR/-95/01)

forced to concentrate near the center to meet the altitude and standoff distance requirements

The Safety Board believes that the air tour operators in Hawaii are in a position to make significant contributions to the improvement of their industry similar to the way in which their Arizona counterparts did when the FAA developed SFAR 50-2 for the Grand Canyon. Public hearing testimony indicated that air tour operators in Hawaii recognize that safety could be improved with modifications to flightpaths and minimum altitudes. The Safety Board believes that the FAA needs to conduct further discussions with the interested parties in Hawaii to resolve the issue of optimum altitudes and routes for air tours. The FAA should also consider the negative effects of such restrictions that may result in unintended degradation of the existing level of safety.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Hawaii Helicopter Operators Association:


Coordinate with the Federal Aviation Administration, and as soon as possible, conduct meetings with other interested parties in Hawaii to resolve the issues of optimum flight altitudes and stand-off distances for air tours. These discussions should consider any positive and negative effects on safety of the current provisions of SFAR 71. (Class II, Priority Action) (A-95-67)

Also as a result of its investigation, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendation A-95-57 to the Department of Transportation; Safety Recommendations A-95-58 through -65 to the Federal Aviation Administration; and Safety Recommendation A-95-66 to the Hawaii Department of Transportation

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation A-95-67 in your reply

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Member HAMMERSCHMIDT concurred in this recommendation.

By:


Jim Hall
Chairman