

Log 2555B



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Safety Recommendation

Date: June 19, 1995

In reply refer to: A-95-66

Mr. Owen Miyamoto
Airports Administrator
State of Hawaii
Department of Transportation
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The National Transportation Safety Board recently conducted a special investigation of the U.S. air tour industry.¹ 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.

At the public hearing in Hawaii, it was learned that the facilities used by air tour operators in Hawaii are frequently on airports owned and operated by the State. Many of these airports provide commercial service and are at least partially Federally funded. The Safety Board became aware of congestion among helicopter operations and serious safety problems at the Kahului Heliport, which is a sub-facility on Maui's Kahului Airport.

The operators and FAA estimated that there are 200 to 300 cycles (takeoffs and landings)

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

per day on the ramp at Kahului Heliport, which is classified as a nonmovement area because the area cannot be seen from the airport control tower. According to the FAA's Air Traffic Control Handbook, a nonmovement area includes taxiways, aprons, and ramps not under the control of air traffic. This classification places arrivals and departures from those areas in the same category as traffic operating at an uncontrolled airport, requiring pilots to maintain visual separation from other aircraft.

An air tour operator described ramp operating conditions as a "potential accident waiting to happen." Operators' testimony indicated that there was a lack of taxiway lane marking, landing zone marking, and clearance marking. In addition, Safety Board investigators' observations and operator testimony revealed the common practices of (1) hot refueling (refueling with the engine/rotor system operating); (2) helicopters departing and arriving over standing helicopters that are both being hot refueled and loading/unloading passengers (often without adequate supervision); and (3) backing out of parking areas without a taxi director or other means to maintain visual separation. Operators described a very loosely organized ramp managed by the pilots and operators with little oversight by the Hawaii DOT or the FAA.

A spokesperson for the State of Hawaii DOT testified that the Kahului Heliport/Airport was the State of Hawaii's property and not the responsibility of the operators to manage. He said that it was "a random operation" and acknowledged that congestion was a problem. He expressed concern about compliance with FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 150-5390-2A, "Heliport Design," which provides guidance in the planning, construction, and layout of heliports.

Specifically, Chapter 6 provides guidance for helicopter facilities located on airports. This chapter discusses takeoff and landing surfaces, dimensions and clearance requirements, spacing criteria, marking and lighting, surface movement, hovering, taxiing, parking, passenger walkways, and passenger services. It also provides reference to other chapters that discuss safety considerations and details of the above. In addition, according to the AC, item 4 on page iii, conformity with the standards set forth in the AC are a prerequisite to Federal grant-in-aid assistance for an airport/heliport.

The Kahului Heliport receives Federal funding, thereby mandating compliance with the provisions of AC 150-5390-2A. The Safety Board believes that oversight by both the FAA and the Hawaii DOT is deficient and that a significant hazard to public safety is present as a result of the physical layout and operation of the facility. Therefore, the Safety Board believes that the FAA and State of Hawaii DOT need to coordinate their collective efforts to bring the airport into compliance with the AC.

Based on the above, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Department of Transportation of the State of Hawaii:

Coordinate with the FAA to achieve compliance with AC 150-5390-2A for all helicopter facilities owned and/or operated by the State. (Class II, Priority Action) (A-95-66)

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-95-67 to the Hawaii Helicopter Operators Association.

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(s) A-95-66 in your reply.

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

By: 
Jim Hall
Chairman