

## **Opening Statement**

Good morning and welcome to the Boardroom of the National Transportation Safety Board.

I am Robert Sumwalt, and I'm honored to serve as the Chairman of the NTSB. Joining me today are my colleagues on the Board, Member Christopher Hart, Member Earl Weener, and Member Bella Dinh-Zarr.

We would like to recognize Texas State Representative John Cyrier, and Caldwell County Emergency Management Coordinator Martin Ritchey. I want to thank you, as well as all the first responders, for your support while our team was on scene.

Today, we meet in open session, as required by the Government in the Sunshine Act, to consider the July 30, 2016 accident in which a hot air balloon collided with power lines in Lockhart, Texas.

Tragically, the pilot and his 15 passengers died. It was the deadliest U.S. aviation accident in 7 ½ years.

On behalf of all of us at the NTSB, I would like to offer our sincerest condolences to the family and friends of those who lost their lives in this tragedy. I'd also like to add my admiration for those of you who are determined to see needed change to

prevent similar accidents in the future. The NTSB's purpose in this investigation aligns with your efforts: to learn from what happened in the accident, so that others don't go through this type of tragedy again.

As you will hear, the person who owned, operated, and piloted the balloon made several poor decisions, both before and during the flight. Among those, he elected to fly in cloudy and foggy conditions when other balloon pilots in the area decided to cancel their flights.

Today you will hear about his medical conditions and the effects of some of the prescription and over-the counter medications that he used, and their potential for impairment.

Impairment not only leads to performance problems, such as slow reaction time, but it can also lead to poor decision-making. This distinction figures prominently in this accident, so I wanted to highlight it now.

We'll also look at the treatment of commercial, passenger-carrying balloon operations under the FAA's federal aviation regulations. This pilot was selling rides in a balloon that could carry more passengers than many airplanes and helicopters used for sightseeing tours. Yet, he was not required to hold an FAA medical certificate. There is clearly a disconnect here – pilots

operating air tour airplanes or helicopters are required to hold FAA medical certificates, yet commercial balloon pilots are not. Expect to hear more discussions about this today.

We'll also examine more generally how the FAA handles the safety oversight of commercial balloon operations.

The 15 passengers boarded what they believed would be an enjoyable sightseeing flight. They took pictures and video, perhaps to help them share a unique adventure with friends.

Today, sadly, we will see these images, not of passengers, but to illustrate the weather conditions, used as exhibits in a fatal accident investigation.

These passengers had a right to the same high standard of safety that they would have been afforded had they been customers on an air tour airplane or helicopter.

Unfortunately, due in part to a medical certificate exemption so outdated that its purpose is lost to memory, they didn't get the first-rate safety standard they deserved.

Now Managing Director Dennis Jones, if you would kindly introduce the staff.

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