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HELICOPTER ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL

TESTIMONY ON
Hudson River Airspace
and
Management of Uncontrolled Airspace Corridors

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

September 16, 2009

Matthew Zuccaro
President

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HAI sincerely appreciates the opportunity to speak with you today regarding issues related to the Hudson River airspace and management of Uncontrolled Airspace Corridors.”

I am here today in my capacity as President of the Helicopter Association International, a not-for-profit, professional trade association which represents the interests of the civil helicopter community. HAI has approximately 3,000 members, inclusive of 1,600 member companies in more than 74 nations. Our members fly over 5,500 helicopters approximately 2.5 million flight hours per year.

On a more personal note, I am also here today as a pilot and instructor for both helicopters and airplanes, who has spent nearly 30 years flying and managing aircraft operations, within the New York City airspace we are speaking about today. My background, training and experience within the New York City airspace includes air tour operations, scheduled helicopter airline service, on demand charter, corporate, and airborne law enforcement operations, as well as New York City heliport and airport management.

I can promise you that I would not have spent almost three decades flying and managing operations in this environment, if I did not believe it was safe.

I also add the fact that I have served on a number of study groups and task force efforts, involving this airspace to include the Task Force study of the East River Corridor which was formed to study the only previous helicopter / airplane mid-air collision in this airspace, which occurred back in 1983, some 26 years ago. The recommendations of that task force formed the basis of the current practices and procedures utilized to this date, which have provided a safe and operationally efficient environment over that 26 year period.

Yes, there was a tragic accident on Saturday, August 8, in which 9 people died.

Make no mistake about it. Our heartfelt sorrow goes out to those who died and our deepest sympathy goes to the families who suffered such terrible loss. One of the aircraft involved, was a helicopter operated by one of our HAI member companies---and the pilot of that aircraft was part of our family. It was tragic.

However, I wish to emphasize again that this is the first accident of this kind within this airspace within the past 26 years, and millions of flights. Accordingly, we should avoid overreaction, and respond with a reasoned, well thought out approach, that will in fact enhance safety.

Dedicated to the advancement of the international helicopter community.

We recognize that one accident, anywhere, of any kind, is one accident too many. And, in the memory of those who died, we can, and should strive to, make operations in the Hudson River Corridor even safer than they currently are. I believe that the FAA proposed recommendations are well-reasoned and sound in nature, which would do just that.

I was honored to serve on the New York Airspace Task Force established by the FAA, in August, to review current operating practices and procedures in the Hudson River corridor, with an eye towards enhancing safety. I am pleased to note that the resultant FAA recommendations, which are supported by HAI and other industry associations, are closely aligned with those of the independent NTSB investigation.

I will not repeat all of details relating to FAA and NTSB recommendations since those agencies will cover them in depth, other than to say they are sound and sensible, with the following benefits.

Making mandatory, the existing voluntary practices, which have been used safely for the past 26 years, the FAA would eliminate any ambiguity, and standardize procedures within the airspace.

The FAA's proposal to establish three tiers of airspace in the exclusionary area would facilitate stratification of aircraft by mission, which would enhance separation of transiting aircraft and those conducting local operations and heliport approaches / departures.

The FAA's airspace recommendation also standardizes the floor of the Class B controlled airspace at 1,300 feet, which simplifies the airspace structure.

The FAA also intends to establish a dedicated VFR transition route within the Class B controlled airspace which will encourage more pilots who are transiting the area to exercise the option of avoiding the exclusionary zone altogether, entering Class B airspace at altitudes between 1,300 and 2,000, while operating under visual flight rules, but remaining under positive air traffic control.

The FAA also intends to propose standardized procedures for fixed-wing aircraft leaving Teterboro to enter Class B airspace over the Hudson River or the exclusionary zone, which will relocate the entry point to a less congested area.

The FAA is currently enhancing and standardizing the three primary aeronautical maps that depict the New York airspace and specific aircraft operating procedures within the New York Class B excluded airspace.

The FAA has also recommended a reallocation of the available Unicom frequencies utilized at the New York City heliports, which will reduce frequency congestion and enhance pilot communications capability.

Equally important, in its recommendations, the FAA has not overlooked training. Training is and always will be one of the primary cornerstones of any effort to reduce accidents and improve safety. Under its proposal, the FAA intends “to develop training programs specifically tailored for pilots, air traffic controllers and fixed-base operators to increase awareness of the procedures and options available when operating in the New York Class B excluded airspace.

At HAI, we stand ready to work with the FAA, and other aviation organizations, to develop and promote this kind of training program within our segment of the industry. It is crucial for pilots to know, not only the airspace options available to them in the NY Class B excluded airspace, but also to know what is expected of them while operating there as well.

Admittedly, none of these recommendations, on its own, is a silver bullet, there are no silver bullets. We wish there were. However, each of these recommendations is a sensible, rational, well thought out element, and, when considered as a package, they will make a real difference to the betterment of safety.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, the Hudson River Corridor is a safe place to fly. I would not have spent almost thirty years flying and managing operations there if it were not. The FAA recommendations, which in most material aspects are in consensus with those of the NTSB, and are supported by industry, will enhance safety and efficiency.

HAI and I look forward to working with the Subcommittee and other interested parties to insure the highest level of safety within the New York Class B excluded airspace, and similar such environments throughout the National Airspace System.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the high priority and fast track initiative by the FAA, which will result in these new procedures being put in place by the end of November this year. We applaud and support their plan.

Again thank you for this opportunity to submit our thoughts.