

Helicopter Industry Comes of Age

from Peter Garden, Transitional Chairman, NZ Helicopter Association

The New Zealand Helicopter Association has recently been established by the Aviation Industry Association to become the voice of our helicopter community. This is a large community that currently includes more than 700 aircraft and well over 3000 people. Peter Garden introduces the new Association to KiwiFlyer readers.



HOW OFTEN do you hear the comment “those helicopter boys, they’re different”? Well the reality is they are, but they (that is the many owners and operators, pilots and engineers) are fed up with the ‘one size fits all mentality’ that has prevailed in the aviation industry for many years.

For example, take rule making. When Rule Part 135 entered the quality framework of the new rules environment there was some limited recognition (after a long and protracted debate led by the Barclay Report) that it is quite simply illogical to apply the same framework to both helicopters and aeroplanes. For many years it was thought that Rule Part 135 would satisfactorily accommodate the needs of the rotary fraternity.

Sadly, that is not always the case and we are seeing issues that are essentially those of the helicopter industry impacting on fixed wing and vice versa. The CAA’s concerns over definition of “crew member” and the subsequent Legal Information Bulletin (LIB4) is largely a helicopter industry issue, however its ability to spill over and have unintended consequences for the fixed wing industry is high. Ask the agriculture industry who have had numerous exchanges with CAA over loader drivers, or farmers who accompany pilots on their pre-operational risk assessment of an area. On the other hand, for those in the helicopter community there are numerous examples of fixed wing rules impacting on the use of helicopters.

Now it is time for the helicopter industry to strike out and establish its own organisation. The Aviation Industry Association is setting up the New Zealand Helicopter Association and it has been on this case for the last 12 months. There are over 700 machines now in the country with well over 3000 people actively engaged. Whether they are private or commercial,

pilots, owners, engineers or ground support – the Association will take care of all their interests and issues. NZHA will be the voice of the helicopter community.

One of the primary considerations must be safety. Helicopter operators engaged in commercial operations have had a stellar performance in recent years

in terms of avoiding serious accident and injury. Why hasn’t there been the same result for private owners and operators? Some in industry think it’s because we have lost our mentoring system. NZHA hopes to see this restored for private pilots to be able to access safety information from their more experienced commercial cousins.

Perhaps it is because the Rules are simply not sensible in some areas. Our industry is growing up fast and becoming very sophisticated, but we don’t have our own operational rules. Papua New Guinea recognised that if it was to get serious about addressing its fatality rate, then rules had to be relevant. They now have one dedicated helicopter rule. NZHA will be lobbying CAA for the same arrangement.

CAA doesn’t really have the resources to address the full range of the industry’s concerns. They have some good people who really do try their best but there are many reports of conflicting and unwieldy interpretations

of rules that simply annoy and upset the helicopter community. In part this is because it is difficult for CAA to keep on top of all the issues. But more importantly there is a deep suspicion within the industry that rules as they presently exist are twisted and turned to fit helicopter operations – ie. back to the ‘one size fits all problem’.

Another example: If in the commercial transport sector there was clear evidence that a particular set of circumstances created undue risk, would it take the New Zealand government over 20 years to address? The short answer is NO, however for helicopters and other operators in the low level environment we have accepted

the intolerable situation of very limited marking of wires. There are more serious accidents and incidents caused by wires in the low level environment than any other hazard yet it is likely it will be another 5 to 7 years before we have an appropriate regulatory framework to address this issue.

Why isn’t the industry working on development of guidelines you may ask? Essentially it comes down to resources, these being: financial; having the necessary organisation to see it through; having collaborative teams of experts to advise; and having a clear go forward strategy. That’s where NZHA will fill the gap.

Without clear and coherent leadership from both the commercial and private operators, the use of helicopters will be marginalised. If that happens then the impact on the New Zealand economy will be felt. This industry now contributes to every sector of the economy from Tourism, Fishing, Agriculture, Infrastructure Development, Training, Medical services

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and recovery of accident victims. However the restraints now being placed on operations in some parts of the economy are intolerable. NZHA intends to develop a data base of ‘environmental effects’ and proactively look after the interests of all members of the helicopter community. It’s not about pushing back but it is about stopping being pushed around.

NZHA will focus the energy of all aspects of the industry on key issues. It will

be the authoritative voice and promoter of helicopter safety in New Zealand. NZHA is the first organisation in New Zealand to publically recognise superior safety performance by industry participants and these safety recognition awards are now open for application.

Go to www.aia.org.nz – helicopters and you will find all the information you require on membership of NZHA as well as our code of conduct, objectives and goals and the NZHA safety recognition awards.

Peter Garden, Transitional Chairman
New Zealand Helicopter Association
Phone 04 472 2707