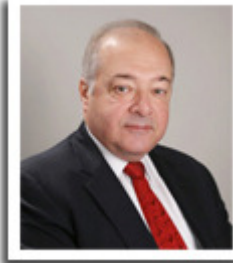




President's Message

by Matt



Safety First, Sound Second

We talk a lot in our industry about the importance of a "Safety First" culture, but I think a conversation about our No. 2 priority also needs to occur: minimizing the impact of a helicopter's sound on the environment. Why, you ask, did I call it *sound*, instead of *noise*? Noise just sounds bad, like an annoying intrusion. I like to think discussions about sound, on the other hand, create a tone of neutral scientific review of the issue.

I hope we all understand the importance of good industry safety performance for our favorable perception by the public, elected officials, regulators, and the press. If not, let me relate a brief story regarding efforts to establish a new heliport a number of years ago.

I was at a meeting of a town board regarding a heliport application and actually thought things were going fairly well, with success in sight. Whereupon in came the superintendent of the local school district to make some comments about the proposed heliport. As he approached the town board's head table, he unpacked what was later identified as a body bag from the local coroner's office and unceremoniously dropped it on the table with a loud thud.

The superintendent then proceeded to advise the members of the town board that when — not if, when — one of the helicopters operating to and from the heliport crashed into one of the town's schools, he was going to come and find all town board members who voted in favor of the heliport and make them come to the crash site so they could place the children's bodies in body bags.

Needless to say, we had planned the flight paths so they did not cross over any populated areas, much less schools. But, as is usually the case, logic and fact lost out and his emotional stunt put a quick end to the heliport application.

Although we understand the emotional power that safety holds on us, we tend to underestimate this same power when the subject is sound and community relations — and, just like safety, the fallout from these discussions can have a devastating effect on our heliports and operations.

The sounds created by helicopters have been erroneously identified by the public and elected officials as the cause for fatigue, learning disabilities, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, medical problems, and individuals prevented from enjoying their personal homes and public common areas. Complaints by a small minority in specific areas have resulted in a nationwide legislative and regulatory initiative to restrict helicopter operations, including limiting access to airspace and curtailing heliport operations.

Make no mistake, in today's online, grass-roots world opposition to helicopter operations is organized, capable, equipped, and effective. These activists hold in their hands the potential to eliminate entire mission-specific helicopter activities.

As an industry, we must ask ourselves: Are we doing all we can to minimize or eliminate our impact on the communities we fly within and over each day? Do we have 100 percent

conformance with established Fly Neighborly efforts and noise abatement programs? The good news is that industry compliance with such programs is, on average, in the high 80 to mid-90 percent range. The bad news is that the 5 to 10 percent rate of noncompliance sharply limits our ability to avoid additional legislative and regulatory initiatives.

Like it or not, our operational and acoustical impact on the public provides great opportunities for politicians, absent logical analysis of the actual issue. We unfortunately also have some members of our industry who naively believe that, as long as we are operating legally and safely, our obligations toward social responsibility are met. Ignoring our full obligation, including our responsibility to minimize our acoustic impact on the environment when possible, will only ill serve our needs.

In the end, every operator, pilot, and segment of our industry, inclusive of civil, public, and military operations, needs to be aware of noise-sensitive areas and comply with Fly Neighborly and noise abatement initiatives. We also need to ensure compliance by those not currently participating in such efforts.

To do otherwise is to invite further restrictions on the helicopter industry, thereby jeopardizing our future.

What are your thoughts? Let me know via e-mail: tailrotor@aol.com.

As always, have a safe flight, fly neighborly, and keep the sound down.

Best regards — MATT

Matt Zuccaro is president of HAI.