



ENSURE SAFE HELICOPTER OPERATIONS IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

Offshore oil and natural gas exploration is pushing deeper into the Gulf of Mexico – often up to 200 miles off the coast with plans to go even farther – yet air traffic infrastructure to support the helicopter flights that service these operations has not kept up. Insufficient facilities and equipment exist in the Gulf to support safe Visual Flight Rules (VFR) and Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) low-altitude operations, placing helicopter pilots and their passengers in great danger. Better communications, surveillance, and weather observation equipment is absolutely essential to support the 3,800 offshore oil platforms and barges, the 35,000 citizens who live and work in the offshore industry, and the helicopter pilots who transport people and goods to and from the mainland each day.

Helicopters flying below 7,000 feet make up a significant portion of air traffic in the Gulf of Mexico. Currently, an estimated 6,000 to 9,000 flights occur between land bases and platform-to-platform each day. VFR flights tend to be short, and as a result some pilots are conducting between 60 to 120 takeoff and landings per day.

Eighty-five percent of the flights in the Gulf are conducted using VFR, while the remaining 15 percent are IFR. Yet beyond 50 miles off shore, pilots in low-altitude aircraft are unable to maintain radio contact with the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Air Route Traffic Control Centers or Flight Service Stations. As a result, pilots rely on company radio nets for services that would normally be provided by the FAA, and under such a system pilots from different companies are on different frequencies while operating in close proximity with one another. The lack of communication and offshore weather information restricts the use of IFR. The inability to rely on instruments is particularly dangerous given rapidly changing weather conditions that are characteristic of the Gulf. Due to the shortage of FAA-approved automated weather observation stations (AWOS) and radio repeater facilities, pilots often encounter sudden and localized changes in weather for which they are not prepared.

More astounding is the limited search and rescue capability that currently exists in the Gulf. Helicopters are getting larger, faster and going out farther off shore, leaving pilots and passengers extremely vulnerable in the tragic event of an accident. Coast Guard helicopters currently in use are restricted in range and payload.

To help address these serious problems, language was included in last year's FAA reauthorization bill to support the development of offshore communication, surveillance, and weather services for helicopter operations in the Gulf. Yet despite bipartisan support in Congress, funds have not yet been appropriated to purchase and install AWOS and radio repeaters on platforms. The safety of our skies, and the pilots and passengers in them, depends on the deployment of such devices as soon as possible.

The Gulf of Mexico is well known as one of the most important locations for natural resource exploration in the next decade, and if these safety concerns are not adequately addressed, they will only get worse over time. Sufficient resources need to be invested to ensure the safety of helicopter operations closer to land as well as flights going to the Outer Continental Shelf. In addition to the FAA, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Homeland Security have responsibility over safety in the Gulf and these agencies will need to work together in developing a comprehensive weather information, communication, and surveillance system along with adequate search and rescue capability. Transportation labor will work with Congress and the Administration to secure maximum funding for these purposes, and to raise awareness of the serious safety problems that affect helicopter pilots in the Gulf of Mexico.

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