

IHST and Safety Efforts Are Tenaciously Seeping into the Helicopter Culture

As the civil helicopter industry in every corner of the world continues to expand and support economic growth, inconsistent safety methods and programs remain a stumbling block in many nations. Too often, growth in helicopter operations also means an increase in helicopter accidents.

However, the International Helicopter Safety Team (www.IHST.org) has gathered civil helicopter accident information from worldwide sources and is seeing a hopeful trend of improved safety. The IHST, which promotes safety and works to reduce accidents, was formed in 2005 to lead a government and industry cooperative effort to improve helicopter safety throughout the world.

IHST contributors from industry and government have established global partnerships wherever there are significant helicopter operations and have worked to encourage industry members to:

- carry out accident analysis,
- develop safety interventions, and
- utilize safety tools created by worldwide teams of safety experts.

In each of the countries where IHST safety tools and concepts have been embraced, the civil helicopter accident rate has been reduced. This is borne out in worldwide accident data. From 1997 thru 2005, the average number of annual civil helicopter accidents worldwide was 570. In addition, this average was trending upward at an annual rate of 2.5 percent.

Since 2006, when the IHST cooperative effort was formed, the average number of annual civil helicopter accidents worldwide has been 515 and the average is trending downward at an annual rate of about 2 percent.

While we don't have solid data on increases or decreases in flying hours during the period since the IHST's creation, the number of helicopters in the world is growing and the flying hours in many helicopter industries have been increasing. Because of this, we are fairly confident that the accident rate is declining by least as much as the 2-percent decline in the accident count.

This is good news because lives are being saved through the worldwide efforts of the IHST and its safety experts. Nevertheless, the IHST feels that the global helicopter accident rate is still unacceptable because people are still dying in helicopters from entirely preventable accidents.

Our central focus continues to be personal/private helicopter activity, which accounts for 18 to 19 percent of annual accidents. IHST research data shows that the number of helicopter accidents in the personal/private category is not at all proportionate to the number of flight hours flown. There is a stunningly large gap between the low percentage of helicopters hours flown in personal/private operations as compared to the high percentage of helicopter accidents. The personal/private category accounts for only about 5 percent of helicopter hours flown, yet results in nearly 20 percent of the helicopter accidents.

The reasons for these accidents are both external and internal. One out of every five fatal helicopter accidents stem from loss of control issues. Next on the list are visibility issues such as darkness, fog, glare, and unexpectedly traveling from visual meteorological conditions into instrument meteorological conditions. And the third-most cited source for fatal accidents is wire strikes. In addition, there is an internal reason behind some pilots who lose control, probe into the dark night, fly into poor weather, and hit wires. Many times, these outcomes stem from attitude. Some pilots don't want to listen to advice, act impulsively, feel that they are invulnerable, or just take too many operational risks until luck runs out on them.

The goal of driving down the accident numbers is being tackled in multiple ways.

- Corporate and industry leaders are providing more helicopter safety education through IHST initiatives.
- Helicopter industry associations are pushing for more advanced training for pilots and for improved technology in the cockpit.
- Operators are voluntarily adding safety enhancing equipment such as cockpit image recorders and ADS-B.
- Safety experts within the IHST are working to adjust the helicopter community's safety attitudes toward managing risk and making decisions based on safety circumstances.

More work needs to be done, but the global helicopter community is embracing the IHST's safety focus. From entire countries and down through one-helicopter operators in small communities, an association with the IHST and its cooperative safety initiatives are the first steps to reduce accidents and to support development of the helicopter industry across nations and within neighborhoods around the world.