

Wires – Working to Get Them Down

Since 1979, New Zealand helicopter pilots have had 116 wire strikes, with 28 deaths. Many of them were with power or phone cables, but 62 of them were from other wires, including fences and elevated gully wiring. To help reduce this, the CAA is getting behind campaigns to combat wire strike accidents.

Any helicopter flying at low level is at risk of a wire strike. They happen in New Zealand with unacceptable frequency – a serious concern.

Jim Burtenshaw, CAA's Manager Safety Investigation, says the CAA wants to raise awareness of the risks associated with helicopter agricultural operations. The CAA is also seeking support from Federated Farmers.

"If pilots, Federated Farmers, and the CAA work together we can create a strong campaign to prevent more wire strike accidents," says Jim.

Helicopter pilots Alan Beck and Dean Lithgow have been spearheading their own independent wire strike awareness campaigns.

The CAA is supporting both Alan's "Down to the Wire", and Dean's "Let's Get 'Em Down" campaigns.

Both campaigns are already receiving a good reception, with posters going up in rural supply stores across New Zealand, such as Farmlands, and advertisements in farming magazines.

Under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, farmers must ensure regulations are complied with on their land. That means they must take all reasonable steps to eliminate hazards to ensure the farm is safe for aerial operations. That includes removing wires. Often farmers don't think of electric feeder wires as hazards because they, themselves, don't fly.

Stringing a wire over a gully or road to save money is not a good idea when you consider the consequences of an accident.

While the aim of both private campaigns is to get wires taken down, they also aim to educate pilots about the risks of

wires, and to be aware of where the wires may be.

"We encourage all pilots to have all wires within the area of operation identified to them by the contracting party before they commence operations.

"Simply talking about it, or having it written into a contract, isn't enough. Pilots should sight all wires on the property so they know where they are, and constantly be aware of them," says Jim.

Even then, the risk remains and accidents still occur. The only solution to eliminate the risk altogether is to remove the wires.

The CAA web site has a new section with information on wire strike avoidance, www.caa.govt.nz/wires.

Jim says, "We're looking forward to the campaigns gaining momentum, and are confident they will help reduce wire strikes over time." ■

A flyer from the campaign spearheaded by Dean Lithgow.

Richie McCaw
International Rugby Player and Pilot

WIRES A PILOTS WORST NIGHTMARE
Let's get 'em down