

Meeting with FAA Re: Helicopter Route Test Plans at Torrance Airport 8/12/2013

Attendees:

FAA	Flying Community
David Suomi, Acting Regional Administrator, WP	Barry Jay, Pres Torrance Airport Assoc
Dale Boufiou, Deputy Regional Administrator, WP	Jack Kenton, Calif Pilots Association
Bill Washington, Terminal District Mgr, So Calif ATO	Steve Goldsworthy, Professional Helicopter Pilots Association
Tito Gonzales, Assist Terminal District Mgr, OTA	Edward Story, VP Calif Pilots Association
Robin Rush, ACTC manager, Torrance Airport	Jim Gates, AOPA Airport Support Network

SUMMARY

Many of the flying community's questions were answered, although those answers led to some further concerns about the test period planning, execution, data collection, data evaluation, and success criteria. The City of Torrance will have major responsibility for all of these actions and the FAA has no idea what they plan to do. The flying community must be vigilant to make sure this activity (if it occurs) is properly and safely executed.

The FAA agrees that this process is politically driven, but no noise data has been provided to support the claims of excessive noise.

The flying community will not have any opportunity to comment on, or to contribute to the SRM report. Although the original SRM panel will re-convene 8/23 to re-evaluate the West PCH route, no participation by members other than the original panel will be permitted. Other members of the flying community will not be allowed to even observe this meeting.

The FAA identified the process for pilots to report near-misses or issues with the testing period:

- 1) Pilot will notify the tower by radio that an incident has occurred and then,
- 2) the tower will provide a phone number for the pilot to call in order to record details of the incident.

If sufficient incidents are reported, the FAA may terminate the 6-month test at any time.

None of the FAA attendees knew about FAR 91.129, which describes helicopter rules for operations in Class D airspace. The FAR states that pilots must "...avoid the flow of fixed-wing aircraft, if operating a helicopter." This issue has apparently not come up in the SRM Panel meetings—at least as far as the draft report shows.

THE SAFETY RISK MITIGATION (SRM) PROCESS

This process is used by FAA throughout the airspace system to evaluate risk of changes to procedures requested by the airport operator and proposed by the tower manager. The flaws in the SRM process identified by the community were verified (slanted panel selection criteria, incomplete risk identification, non-consensus decision processes, and documentation deficiencies) but there are no plans to modify it.

Of the three helicopter routes examined by the original SRM panel, the West PCH route will be re-examined by a re-convened SRM panel consisting only of the original participants. There will be no opportunity for the community to observe at this meeting.

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The final report from the panel will be forwarded to FAA Washington, DC for evaluation. They will make the decision on whether to go ahead with the proposed test period. A decision is expected in 60 or more days. Approval will permit the test period to commence.

THE POLITICS

The City of Torrance requested the route changes in response to a few, very vocal complainers and the FAA initiated the SRM process at the request of the tower manager.

The Community reviewed the City noise ordinance violation data with the FAA, noting that helicopters violated the ordinance an average of less than one time per month over the last 5 years. Mr Suomi was unaware that the City has a noise monitoring system. The Community also reviewed the results of a TOA complaint study over a 14-month period that showed that over 50% of the complaints were made by only 12 individuals.

No noise measurements along the helicopter routes have been provided to support a need to reduce flight safety for noise abatement. William Washington of the FAA stated no reduction in flight safety will occur—a position the flying community disputed. It is not clear that a validated need for any changes has been established.

THE TEST PERIOD

Major responsibility for the test, including the test plan, data collection and analysis (if any), evaluation criteria, and success criteria resides with the City of Torrance. The FAA has, however, requested that Torrance prepare a test plan for review.

Participation by the FAA in the test period will consist of regular tower operations. The tower will be responsible for reporting any near misses (less than 500 feet) or other incidents THAT THEY SEE. Pilots can report incidents by radio call to the tower followed by a phone call to the tower to provide details of the incident. The tower can halt the test period at any time they perceive a safety threat.

No notice of the test or caution to pilots that helicopters will be traversing the traffic patterns will be provided. Advertising this information to the flying community will be provided by the City of Torrance by way of “outreach meetings” with local pilots. There appears to be no plan to alert itinerant pilots that the test is in progress.

No process was offered for the flying community to review, evaluate, or provide comments on the test plan or test period. No criteria for determining the success or failure of the test period was offered. The FAA appears to be abdicating all of these decisions to the City of Torrance.

THE FINAL OUTCOME

Although the test period procedures are characterized as “voluntary,” the FAA advised that, depending on the outcome of the test period, the procedures may be made mandatory. It was not stated explicitly, but it appears that the City of Torrance will make this decision.