



SUNDANCE STRESSES SAFETY

News / Business aviation



Since being purchased by Air Methods in December 2012, Las Vegas-based heli-tour operator **Sundance Helicopters** has focused sharply on **safety programs** and fleet renewal. This year Sundance became the nation's first heli-tour Tops (tour operators program of safety) member to implement the FAA's aviation safety action program (ASAP) and maintenance safety action program (MSAP).

The voluntary, self-reporting programs are designed to identify and reduce safety concerns stemming from operational deficiencies, non-compliance with regulation, deviations from company policy and unusual events. Each report is investigated and corrective action is determined and taken per FAA Advisory Circular 120-66B. Archie Gray, senior vice president of Air Methods, said, "The bottom line in helicopter operations and in aviation is safety. Sundance's ASAP and MSAP participation gives us an opportunity to work collegiately with the FAA to promote safety."

Pilots and mechanics who voluntarily self-report under ASAP and MSAP are shielded from FAA enforcement action but not necessarily company action, according to assistant chief pilot Bill Orvis. "If pilots or mechanics believe they have broken a rule or have seen something that is really unsafe and has not been addressed, they can fill out an ASAP or an MSAP report, which then

goes to the ASAP or MSAP committee. For pilots that's our POI [FAA principal operations inspector], management and pilots. They decide to accept it or reject it. If you have broken a reg [filling out the report] protects you from FAA action, but not necessarily from the company. Part of our safety management system is to have a just culture, and to have a successful SMS you need this information. We are the only heli-tour company using ASAP," Orvis claimed.

ASAP/MSAP isn't the only arrow in the Sundance safety quiver, according to company president Jay Francis. "We're at IS-BAO [International Standards for Business Aircraft Operations] Level 3, we recently completed a U.S. Department of Defense two-year inspection, and we are at FAA SMS Level 2. We have instilled a just culture and are doing things right because they are right," he said.

FLEET REJUVENATION UNDER WAY

Sundance currently employs more than 200 people, among them 40 maintenance technicians and 10 maintenance support personnel, and 35 full-time and 15 to 18 seasonal pilots.

The company operates a mixed fleet of 27 Airbus Helicopters EC130B4/T2s and AS350B2s and will soon add a Cessna Caravan. Francis notes that by June the company will operate one of the newest fleets in the Canyon, with 16 EC130T2s, four EC130B4s and six to eight older AS350B2s relegated to take sightseers from the top to the bottom of the Canyon.

"Being a part of Air Methods has given us access to capital that has allowed our fleet rejuvenation program," Francis said. The company recently took delivery of EC130T2s from Airbus Helicopters in Grand Prairie, Texas.

Few pilots who come to Sundance have turbine time, Orvis explained. "We train to a higher standard. We are trying to give pilots more education than they need by law. The minimum hiring standard is 1,000 hours PIC and we would like them to have an instrument rating. We prefer CFIs, but we do have several pilots who were never instructors. Typically this is their first turbine job. They build some turbine time here and then go on to EMS or utility flying. The initial pilot training takes three weeks. The first week is ground school, the second is flying capped off by the Part 135 check ride, and the third is route training: the route to and from the canyon and all the letters of agreement we need to abide by. They get a check ride on that as well, including the SFRA [special flight rules area] for the Grand Canyon. So it is essentially two check rides to get on the line. We evaluate people after 60 days. First we put them in the AStar before moving them over to the 130s. Flying the ups and downs in the AStar is a nice transition into the turbine world without all of the distractions of [flying a complete tour]. It's a nice job to transition into from the CFI world. We want you to get in your helicopter, take care of your people, and fly there and fly back."

Besides offering tour packages, charters to places such as Phoenix and the Burning Man festival in Black Rock Desert, Nev., the company finds itself increasingly arranging theme night parties—Great Gatsby night, James Bond night and so on—that feature helicopter rides around the Las Vegas strip, hosted from its newly remodeled and expanded terminal.

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