# Regional Helicopter System Plan
Project Update

Introduction

In order to determine how helicopter operations affect the Washington, D.C. region today and how they may affect it in the future, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is sponsoring a regional helicopter system plan study. In the first newsletter, the purpose and need for the regional helicopter system plan was outlined. It described the importance of the project, its objectives, the use of helicopters within the region, and the study process, including obtaining public input. This study will be completed in two phases – Phase I involves collecting the inventory information and assessing the current activity and system facilities, and Phase II addresses facility needs and community concerns.

Phase I of the study is nearly complete. As noted above, the first phase was intended to collect specific information on who was using helicopters in the region, provide an inventory of heliport and airport facilities used by these operators, and to gain an understanding of the operator needs. Information was collected using various data sources from agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Helicopter Association International (HAI), Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG). Surveys were also developed specifically for this study. This newsletter provides a summary of the findings.

What are the activity levels of helicopters in the region?

Historical and current data on helicopter activity within the region is limited. As such, historical documents from MWCOG were collected and combined with surveys developed for this study to account for current helicopter activity levels. The information revealed that the number of based helicopters within the region declined from 140 helicopters in 1992 to 41 helicopters in 2002.

Metropolitan Washington Study Area
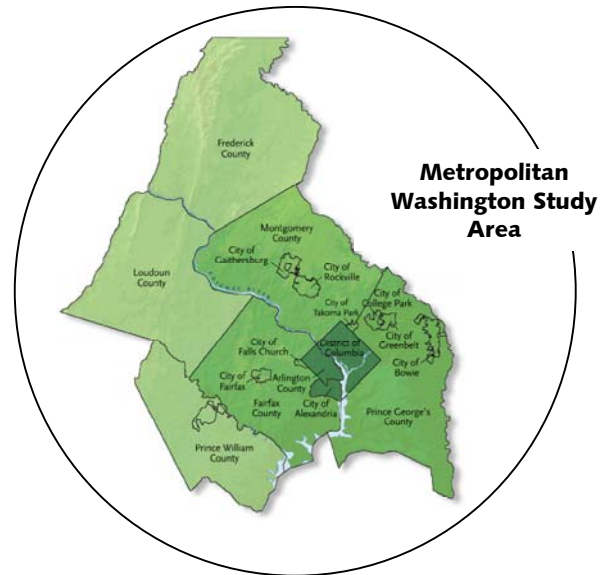
There was a corresponding decline in activity from 180,000 operations (landings and takeoffs) in 1992 to 108,870 operations in 2002.

The surveys provided a snapshot of the number of helicopters based in the region and who is operating them. Of the 41 based helicopters in 2002, 21 were civilian helicopters and 20 were military helicopters. These helicopters were primarily single and twin turbine helicopters; only two were small piston driven helicopters.

What types of helicopters are based in the region and who is flying them?

Operators of these helicopters include the military, various federal and state governmental agencies, hospitals, for-hire operators, and private corporations.

Below is a partial list of operators within the region:

Military:
- 89th Airlift Wing – Air Force
- HMX-1 – Marines (presidential helicopters)

Police:
- Metro (D.C.) Police
- Fairfax (VA) County Police
- Anne Arundel County Police
- U.S. Park Police

Hospital:
- Inova Hospital

For-Hire and Corporate:
- America Rising/Glenwood Aviation
- Capital Helicopter
- AOL/Time Warner
- Bechtel/Nevada

What missions do these operators fly?

The various operators noted above fly different missions within the region. The survey of operators indicated the following:

Military/Defense	52%
Emergency Medical Services (EMS)	16%
Law Enforcement	14%
Corporate/Business	6%
Flight Training	6%
Electronic New Gathering	2%
Other Missions	4%

Where do these operators fly from within the region?

Helicopters are based and operate out of a number of facilities located throughout the region. For example, military helicopters are based and operate primarily out of Andrews Air Force Base. Other operators fly from privately owned, private use facilities throughout the region. In many instances, these facilities are comprised simply of a helipad and do not have lights for night operations or instrument approaches for poor weather conditions.

Dulles International Airport and various general aviation airports throughout the region serve as a base of operations for a several helicopter operators. These facilities provide many services such as fuel and maintenance, as well as all-weather operational capability. The South Capital Street Heliport, located in the southern section of Washington, D.C., is the only privately owned, public-use heliport in the region.

What were some of the findings regarding helicopter operator issues and needs?

The surveys provided an insight to operator issues and needs. For instance, a number of for-hire operators providing charter services indicated that they utilize unprepared landing sites such as open fields of a parking lot to drop off or pick up passengers. This is due, in part, to the minimal number of heliport sites within the region and the specific needs of the passengers.

The corporate and for-hire operators also noted that a few additional heliport facilities are needed in the region, particularly, in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore.

The operators also noted that the current airspace restrictions within the region have significantly affected their operations, particularly those that restrict access to Reagan National Airport and the Metro D.C. area.

The public operators, including the police, EMS, and hospital operators, indicated that their facilities are adequate and there is little need for additional facilities. It was noted, however, that small helipads located at rest areas or park-n-rides along major highways could serve the EMS operators and police by providing convenient locations to transport patients or serve accident scenes without operating directly on an emergency scene.

Are there standardized routes for helicopters to follow?

Yes. The FAA, in cooperation with the helicopter operators and various helicopter trade groups, established helicopter routes throughout with MWCOG region and in Maryland. There are currently a number of helicopter routes designated throughout the region, which are depicted on helicopter route charts. In order to minimize the noise associated with helicopter operations, these routes overlay major highways and roadways in the region. These routes also have minimum and maximum altitudes in order to maintain a safe altitude and minimize noise above communities, while not limiting the altitudes to remain out of busy airspace associated with Reagan National Airport and Dulles International Airport.

The operators that were surveyed indicated that they fly these routes on a regular basis. However, the police and EMS helicopters indicated that they must deviate from these standard routes from time to time in order to operate effectively, and in the case of the EMS operators, to efficiently fly patients to the hospital.

How was this information used?

The information obtained in Phase I was used to characterize the helicopter activity within the region, identify issues related to helicopter activity, and to define needs of the helicopter operators. This information was used as the basis to develop the goals, objectives, and content of Phase II, which will specifically address a number of items including:

- The recommended system
- Environmental issues
- Economic benefits of the recommended system
- Policies and plans for system development
- An implementation program
- Security and disaster airlift plan

What is the next step?

With the existing activity identified, the next step is to complete Phase II of the report. A number of public meetings will be held throughout the remainder of Phase II. The first two meetings with the public have been scheduled for July 30, 2003 in Rockville, Maryland and July 31, 2003 in Alexandria, Virginia. The intent of these meetings is to solicit comments from the public regarding their issues and concerns related to helicopter operations. Further meetings will be held with the public as the study progresses.

To whom should questions about the study be addressed?

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