

# Regional Helicopter System Plan Project Update

Newsletter 1

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## Introduction

Throughout the Metropolitan Washington region, helicopters are used on a daily basis – by both public and private agencies -- to perform a variety of missions. In order to document these current helicopter operations as well as to determine both the ways in which they are affecting the region today and may do so in the future, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is sponsoring a regional helicopter system plan study. The study is being conducted simultaneously with a statewide helicopter system plan sponsored by the Maryland Aviation Administration (MAA). This will allow for coordination of data collection and analysis across the broad Metropolitan Washington – Baltimore region. In conjunction with COG, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is providing a large portion of the funding.

## Why is this study needed?

While the existence of current helicopter activity in the region is apparent to many residents and visitors, the impact of that activity, in terms of social costs and benefits, has not been systematically evaluated in recent years. In fact, the last COG study to examine vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft in the region was conducted a decade ago. Since 1992 there have been changes in helicopter operations in the area. This study will capture up-to-date information on helicopter activity and examine its costs and benefits on the community and its residents. The new study will build on, and to the degree possible, incorporate data from the 1992 study as well as more recent information on helicopter activity and noise prepared by the Committee on Noise Abatement and Aviation at National and Dulles Airports (CONAANDA).



## How do we collect and use pertinent data?

Because helicopters frequently operate outside of controlled airspace, and are operated by a wide variety of private companies and public agencies, there is no single source of data about their activity. As a result, surveys are used extensively in this study to collect data such as: how many and what type of helicopters are based in the region; what missions do they serve; who operates them; what routes do they fly and at what altitude; how often do they fly, etc. That data is very important in order to analyze:

- The extent of noise impacts in the region
- Which noise abatement procedures will effectively address the public's concerns
- The economic impacts and public service benefits of helicopters
- What are the future trends of helicopter activity in the region

An accurate database is also necessary in order to address policy issues such as what role should COG play to:

- Help mitigate helicopter noise impacts
- Enhance the public and economic benefits that are derived from helicopter services; and
- Ensure that helicopters play an effective role as one mode of the region's transportation network.

## Who uses helicopters?

Helicopters are operated by a wide variety of public and private agencies. These public entities include local police and fire departments, as well as a number of federal agencies responsible for law enforcement, homeland security and public safety. Among them are the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Coast Guard, and the Customs Service, for example. The different branches of the U. S. military, such as the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Marine Corps also frequently utilize helicopters. Private entities employing helicopters in their regular activities may include hospitals, the media (traffic and news reports) commercial operators and others.

## What missions do these helicopters serve?

The missions are diverse, and this study will seek to quantify and analyze them. In general, however, helicopter missions fall into the following broad categories:

- Emergency medical evacuation and rescue (air ambulance)
- Disaster response/relief
- Search and rescue
- Military surveillance, support, and security
- Military liaison/VIP transportation
- Government (civilian) liaison/VIP transportation
- Law enforcement (federal, metropolitan, state and park police)
- Fire fighting
- Corporate/business transportation (both private and for hire charter/air taxi)
- Media (news and traffic reporting)
- Aerial filming/photography

- Utility/construction (high-rise construction/power line surveys/etc.)
- Agricultural/seeding
- Forestry/wildlife monitoring
- Flight training
- Sightseeing
- Personal/discretionary

## Where do these helicopters operate?

Helicopters take off and land from public use airports (Dulles International, Leesburg, Manassas, and College Park, for example), military sites (such as the Pentagon, Quantico, and Andrews Air Force Base), and private-use helipads located throughout the region (hospitals, police, business). Portions of the region have traditionally been restricted airspace, and access to Reagan National Airport and flexibility to fly through District of Columbia airspace has been affected by other restrictions imposed since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Because of the diverse nature and purposes of helicopter missions, however, helicopter overflights range widely in the area and include both commercial and residential areas.

Part of the study is designed to collect and analyze specific data on these helicopter operations. In particular, the study will address the following factors:

- What types of missions are served in the District by helicopters;
- Who the operators are;
- What types of helicopters are used;
- What routes and altitudes are flown;
- How frequently flights take place;
- What the characteristics of both helicopter and ambient noise are;
- Where the "demand centers" (the place from which helicopter operators and passengers are going and coming) are located in the region; and
- What the helicopter-related FAA Air traffic control procedures and airspace regulations are.

## **Whose needs is the study designed to consider?**

As was mentioned at the outset, the study is designed to consider the impact of helicopter operations on the community in terms of social costs (such as noise impacts) and social benefits (such as economic and transportation benefits). In the context of the study, “community” is a broad concept that encompasses the entire spectrum of constituencies who live and work in the region. So, the study will look at the roles that helicopters play in government, business, law enforcement, and also as they impact private citizens. Consideration will be given to the general public, that is, private citizens who do not regularly use helicopters but whose lives are affected by helicopter operations. Some citizens, for example, have expressed concern about issues such as helicopter noise, which is addressed below. This study will also investigate the role that helicopters play in the regional transportation network; will document the economic impact helicopters do and may have on the region; and will consider the needs of helicopter operators in terms of facility requirements, navigation aids, airspace and air traffic control procedures.

## **Will the study address helicopter noise?**

Yes. The study will devote considerable focus to the issue of helicopter noise. Because of the large number of outdoor monuments, attractions and activities that engage both local residents and visitors to the area, as well as the large residential neighborhoods in the region, COG is aware of the importance of addressing this noise sensitivity. The study will document noise levels and operating patterns, and will make recommendations concerning noise mitigation.

## **Who will conduct the study?**

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) will serve as the Sponsor for this project, and will be responsible for overall program management. Program management will involve the oversight of internal review and coordination within COG and its various constituencies, as well as the public review process.

As the study sponsor, COG has selected a consulting team to prepare the system plan. The members of the consulting team have specialized expertise and experience in a range of technical and professional fields relevant to the project. Edwards and Kelcey, Inc. is the lead consultant. Edwards and Kelcey will be assisted with specific tasks and issues by the following firms: HNTB; Chng Environmental; ARP Inc; and The Borden Group, Inc.

In addition, a combined Study Advisory Group (SAG) has been organized for this study as well as for the heliport system plan being prepared for the State of Maryland. The SAG will provide input, review critical working papers, and lend technical insights to both studies. Representatives from COG, MAA, FAA, Virginia DOAV, CONAANDA, other agencies with statewide/regional aviation and land use responsibilities, citizens representatives, helicopter operators, and other interested parties, have been invited to participate on the SAG.

## **Will the public have an opportunity to participate?**

Yes. Public involvement is an integral part of the study. An extensive public coordination, outreach and education process will be conducted in tandem with the technical portion of the study. One of the primary purposes of this outreach is to facilitate communication between the study team and the public, and to establish a formal mechanism through which the team can receive input from the public about issues of concern to them associated with rotorcraft activity. The team hopes to learn about the public’s attitudes in relation to routes, altitudes, types of helicopters and helicopter missions, and time and frequency of overflights, for example.

Because the public involvement component is intended to encourage active communication and dialogue, several public information and regional meetings, in which all interested parties are encouraged to participate, will be held throughout the study period and across the region. Individuals who wish to learn about the project and/or to provide input, but who do not wish to attend meetings, will be afforded access to information through a variety of materials, including newsletters, a website, and technical reports.

## **What is the study process?**

Because of the complexity of the study and the need to include and respond to public input, the study will be divided into two phases. Phase I will consist of data collection about existing helicopter operations. This inventory will include collecting noise and airspace data, such as flight paths and their source location. It will also include the collection of economic data to determine the financial impacts of helicopter operations on the region as well as system requirements and needs. Phase II will address the development of a recommended regional helicopter system plan including implementation and policy recommendations. The process is expected to take 18 months to 2 years to complete.

## **To whom should questions about the study be addressed?**

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