



Suit blames copter crash on windshield, speed

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HOUMA — The latest lawsuit filed after a January oilfield helicopter crash in a Terrebonne marsh killed eight people alleges that a replacement windshield and the negligence of the aircraft's owner and manufacturer are to blame.

The suit, filed Wednesday in federal court in New Orleans on behalf of the wife and infant son of one of the oilfield workers killed, seeks \$13.5 million in damages.

Houston attorney Richard Mithoff, who represents Krystal Marie Mauricio, widow of 30-year-old Andrew Mauricio, said evidence from the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation indicates a hawk struck the windshield of the Sikorsky S-76C ++ helicopter minutes after it took off from Morgan City for a Shell production platform in the Gulf of Mexico. The helicopter, owned and operated by Lafayette-based Petroleum Helicopters Inc., carried two pilots employed by PHI and seven oilfield workers from two companies, Dynamic Industries and MMR Offshore Services. One worker, Steven Yelton of Floresville, Texas, survived.

Mithoff said a lightweight, cast-acrylic

plastic windshield had been installed on the helicopter, which reduced weight but was more susceptible to impact than the original glass windshield.

To maintain the same degree of protection as a thicker windshield, the helicopter's maximum speed should have been limited to no more than 109 knots, or 125 mph, according to a letter released by Sikorsky.

"As an alternative to the use of the Sikorsky-approved windshield types, operators with aircraft possessing cast-acrylic windshields can attain an equivalent level of impact tolerance by limiting the maximum speed of the helicopter to no more than 109 knots," the letter reads.

According to the National Transportation Safety Board, the helicopter was flying at 138 knots. The investigation also indicated the windshield had been replaced twice in the past two years, once because it was cracked.

A spokesman for PHI did not return two calls requesting comment Wednesday.

Mauricio's suit names PHI, Sikorsky and American Aeronautics, the windshield's manufacturer, as defendants.

At issue in the case will be whether PHI knew about the reduced impact-

resistance of the cast-acrylic windshields and whether they warned pilots, Mithoff said.

The suit is at least the sixth in the crash's wake; some have been filed in District Court in Terrebonne and others in federal court in New Orleans.

In a federal suit, Yelton seeks \$22.5 million from PHI; Sikorsky Aircraft Corp., the helicopter's maker; and Aeronautical Accessories.

The wives of two passengers and a pilot of the helicopter, as well as the mother of another passenger, have also filed suits.

Mithoff said Mauricio's wife gave birth to a son just days before the crash, adding to the trauma of his death.

"It's been devastating. They obviously had looked forward to the birth of this child, and he had very much looked forward to spending time with his child and all the things young families do together," Mithoff said.

Mithoff said he expects the suits pending in federal court will likely be consolidated into a single case, at least for the purpose of discovery, an investigation that shares evidence between all parties involved in the case.

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