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# SAFETYWIRE

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# Bird Strikes in Rotorcraft Operations

(**Source:** SKYbrary)

*Blackhawk helicopter after collision with a migrating crane at 800 feet AGL [Source: wikicommons, Author: USAF, 28 December 2015]*

## Description

A number of factors, especially the amount of time spent in low-altitude operations, place rotorcraft at particular risk for bird strikes.

On July 9, 2022, a Bell 206 L-1, with only the pilot aboard, departed Cattai, New South Wales, Australia. According to the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, about nine minutes later, the helicopter broke up in flight and impacted terrain. The investigation found that a wedgetail eagle had hit the aircraft just below the front left windscreen. The report also said it was unlikely the pilot, who died in the crash, had time to see and avoid the eagle because of sun glare and a required radio frequency change. The report added that the pilot was probably startled by the bird strike, which resulted in an abrupt control input. This led to the main rotor blades hitting the tail boom and the subsequent in-flight breakup.

Although bird strikes have caused a number of fatal fixed-wing crashes, it's rare for impact with a single bird to result in a hull loss. This accident highlights the unique dangers posed to rotorcraft by bird strikes.

## Rotorcraft Vulnerabilities

"Rotorcraft have a unique vulnerability to bird strike in comparison with other aircraft," the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in Special Airworthiness Information Bulletin (SAIB) AIR-21-17R1. "Most rotorcraft flight profiles are in the low altitude environment below 3,500 feet AGL, an airspace that is also the most densely populated with birds," the SAIB noted. The document, issued in 2023, also said more than 90 percent of bird strikes occur in that airspace. "A bird strike may lead to a loss of control in flight, either through damage to a critical system component on the rotorcraft or by penetrating into the crew area and incapacitating the pilot," the document added.

In 1996, the FAA issued airworthiness standards to protect against bird strikes on transport category rotorcraft. But the SAIB said other categories of rotorcraft can also benefit from applying those enhanced design features. The document makes two recommendations:

- Consider design and equipment safety options outlined in the FAA's Rotorcraft Safety Promotion Concept (RSPC). (See paragraph below.)
- Consider operational risk mitigation options. They include:
    - Learning about the local bird population and using that knowledge to plan and fly routes.
    - Reducing airspeed when practical.
    - Increasing altitude.
    - Wearing personal protective equipment such as a helmet and visor.

## Rotorcraft Safety Promotion Concept (RSPC)

The Rotorcraft Safety Promotion Concept (RSPC) is meant to inform rotorcraft owners and operators of **voluntary** design and equipment features that can be installed to enhance safety. For rotorcraft certified in the normal category (Part 27), those features include:

- Windshield material that is bird strike resistant up to a declared airspeed, based on successful testing.
- Bird strike deterrents, such as lights, audio features, and high-visibility rotors.
- Indicated airspeed limited to 80 knots by the Rotorcraft Flight Manual (RFM).

For rotorcraft certified in the transport category (Part 29), those features include:

- Windshield tested to specified requirements, OR
- Windshield not tested but all flight critical components forward of the main rotor mast were successfully tested.

## Additional Risk Mitigation Options

A 2021 article in the European Union Aviation Safety Agency's (EASA) Community Network listed a number of ways rotorcraft pilots can reduce bird strike risk. They include:

- When possible, avoid areas of known bird concentration, such as wildlife sanctuaries, coastlines, and landfill sites.
- When possible, avoid transit over wetlands and inland water areas such as lakes and ponds.
- Cross coastlines at a 90-degree angle to minimize exposure to bird activity.
- Before takeoff, listen for bird warnings on the Automatic Terminal Information Service (ATIS).
- Report bird activity to Air Traffic Control (ATC).
- After takeoff, climb as quickly as possible and fly above 2,500 feet AGL.
- Use strobe lights, taxi lights, and/or landing lights when operating in or near bird activity.
- If on a collision course with a bird, maneuver with an upward vector, as most birds break downward when they see an object in their flight path.
- If a bird strike is known or suspected, land as soon as practical. A full inspection should be carried out.

# FAA Official: "Don't Over-engineer" SMS

(Source: AIN, Kerry Lynch with contributions from Jessica Reed. May 27, 2025)


With the May 2027 safety management system (SMS) deadline looming for manufacturers, air tours, and charter operators, the FAA is finding that a lack of understanding is still prevalent on how to develop and implement SMS, according to Tim Adams, acting director of the FAA's Office of Safety Standards.

Participating in a fireside chat at the recent National Air Transportation Association Air Charter Summit in Washington, D.C., Adams cited the misunderstanding over implementation as one of the biggest stumbling blocks surrounding SMS.

Another, he noted, surrounds the inspector workforce. "We have to realize that the majority of our inspector workforce were once commercial aviators and transitioning them from an aviator to a regulator is a journey, so be patient," he advised attendees at the summit. Adams noted that if there is a disagreement or misunderstanding, operators can initiate the agency's Consistency and Standardization Initiative (CSI) process that elevates the questions.

"I think the third [stumbling block]—and there's nothing to support this other than just a gut feeling—is the ability for a service provider to actually conform in a well-practiced manner to its own safety policy," Adams added.

Along those lines, he provided advice on developing an SMS. "Don't over-engineer it. Also, don't try to use someone else's because it's not going to fit what your organization does. And, then, conduct a gap analysis of the things you already do."

He said organizations will be surprised that most of what they already do falls within one of the four components of an SMS. Most of the gaps likely will fall under the safety policy component, he suggested, noting that this is what they found in the Part 121 realm.

“Probably most importantly, once you close those gaps and redefine and work that safety policy, commit to following it,” Adams added.

The FAA has been working to leverage associations to help dispel myths about SMS. One of the best ways to collaborate on them, he added, is through continual sharing of information and data. But he acknowledged that the onus is on the regulator to build trust on that front.

“We need to…work with industry to reassure you that the information that you’re sharing is not going to be used against you in some sort of enforcement or entrapment manner, and really, it can be the next paradigm shift in advancing aviation safety as we share information across the board.”

Meanwhile, the FAA is working on the training piece, revamping its courses based on lessons learned from Part 121 implementation. It is trying to adopt what Adams called a “maturity model” based on the confidence inspectors have in an SMS program. In other words, the more confidence an inspector has in the program, the less hands-on oversight it will require.

“To gain confidence in that, the inspector workforce needs not just to check a box that you have an SMS that you’ve pulled it off the shelf and dusted it off and shown us. They need to be going in and asking the question, ‘OK, well, where did you identify a hazard? Show me how you mitigated that risk. OK, now show me how you are sure that you mitigated that risk and are doing that kind of closed loop between safety risk management and safety assurance.’”

Once that confidence is built, the FAA will use its risk-based decision-making surrounding surveillance.

Adams also addressed questions about using designees and balancing the workforce to reduce wait times in areas such as minimum equipment list (MEL) approvals and pilot check rides.

On the workforce, he noted that safety inspectors were protected from ongoing cuts and, in fact, do not qualify for the optional early retirements offered this year. Instead, the agency has been told to “hire, hire, hire,” he said, and it is using a variety of recruiting tools such as incentives.

Adams also reassured that the FAA is relying on individual designees, “actually quite a bit… It really does free up the inspector workforce to focus more on safety-critical functions that they need to perform and alleviates a lot of resources for us.” About 98% to 99% of the work or tasks that can be done are completed by designees, he added.

While he was unsure of wait times for MEL approvals, Adams said the agency recognizes that delays can ground aircraft, harming businesses with “a cascading effect.”

One of the issues that causes these delays is incomplete information submitted to the agency. The FAA is working on the education aspect of this, he said, but also is looking at potential technologies such as artificial intelligence to expedite initial scans that can flag when information is missing, ultimately expediting the process and freeing up inspector time. “We’re exploring those avenues. We’re a little ways off,” he said, including ensuring security surrounding the information.

The FAA is also exploring how to better leverage the use of designees to fill in gaps while balancing workload. A fraction of designated pilot examiners, for instance, may only do between one and 10 certification projects a year. “That’s not helping us because, no matter if you do 100 certifications or you do one certification, the amount of oversight that we have to provide on that designee is the same.”

# Bizav SOPs from NBAA, FSI, and CAE Seek To Raise Safety Bar

(Source: AIN, Chad Trautvetter, November 13, 2025)

A standard operating procedures (SOPs) manual published today by NBAA marks the culmination of a long-standing effort aimed at helping business aircraft operators follow the same, proven standards. Developed jointly by the association and aviation training providers FlightSafety International and CAE, the new manual incorporates best practices developed with input from business aircraft operators of all sizes, manufacturers, and training experts.

“Widespread adoption and implementation of the SOPs will result in improved safety through standardization and ensure consistency among multi-fleet operators and dynamic crew and staffing situations,” NBAA said. The SOPs also will produce stronger data, enabling tailored and informed improvement to training programs, it added.

Crews can expect to see the SOPs during training events at FlightSafety International and CAE starting in mid-2026, giving operators time to become familiar with the new standards. Additionally, NBAA will offer opportunities for the industry to provide feedback on the manual as it continues to update the resource with best practices.

“We’re excited to introduce these SOPs with our partners after years of work with operators, aircraft manufacturers, and training experts,” said NBAA president and CEO Ed Bolen. “These SOPs will ensure everyone is following proven best practices—creating a more predictable safety environment for all.”

“This is a defining collaborative step to enhance safety in business aviation,” said CAE senior director of global training solutions Timothy Schoenauer. FlightSafety International learning center operations executive v-p Ben Carter added, “Embedding the SOPs into training is a step toward greater consistency and directly supports safer operations.”

# SAFETY MANAGER'S CORNER

PRISM SMS

## Assuring Corrective Actions

Effective safety management demands process accountability for itself; in other words- assumptions are a bad thing when it comes to a safety management system. Applying this type of accountability to corrective actions from employee submitted reports and internal evaluation program (IEP) findings is an essential part of the correct process. An effective (and compliant) SMS contains evidence and documentation of meaningful follow-up pertaining to these corrective actions.

Corrective actions and people have something in common: not a single one is perfect. The same corrective action that seemed like the perfect solution at the time, when examined months down the road can prove not so perfect. That, however, is not the problem. The problem is when the ASSUMPTION of perfection rules the process. For example, let's say a ground safety report is submitted describing the difficulty a tug driver has hearing a whistle blow from the wing walkers when a collision is eminent. After some investigation and research, the corrective action put into place changes the aircraft towing SOP to have the wing walkers carry an airhorn device instead of a whistle. If a concern of collision presents itself, the wing walker would activate the air horn by depressing the button on the top of the aerosol can. The air horns are placed in the storage locker outside the line shack and training is completed. At this point, can we assume the corrective action is completely effective and the hazard resolved? That would be a mistake. Our SMS has follow-up assurance checks in place to verify the corrective action is working as expected. About 100 days after the air horn change was implemented, winter has reared its head and outside temperatures hover below freezing for several weeks. As part of the follow-up assurance check, the safety manager examines the air horns contained in the storage locker and discovers they do not work when exposed to below freezing temperatures for an extended period. Thankfully this wasn't discovered when a wing walker needed to use the horn to notify the tug driver to stop immediately! In this case, unintended consequences reduced the effectiveness of the corrective action, it was not applied properly, and a modification is necessary. In some circumstances, follow-up via additional assurance checks are appropriate to ensure a corrective action is working in perpetuity.

Don't fall into the assumption trap. Follow-up and make sure every corrective action is effective and meeting expectations. Make sure the SMS maintains accountability.

# Quote of the Month

**We can only know that we know nothing. And that is the highest degree of human wisdom.**

BY: Leo Tolstoy

Feeling comfortable is not a bad thing. It's just that something inevitably comes along and shakes things up. Organizations experience the same dynamic. If your organization is feeling comfortable, keep in mind that something is coming... Effective organizations frequently challenge their awareness and understanding of what is going on at all levels—and what might be coming...

# On Short Final….

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# UPCOMING COURSES

Dec 9-11, 2025—PROS Course
**Virtual ICAT Training**
Virtual

Jan 12-14, 2026—PROS Course
**Airline Safety Management System (SMS)**
Virtual

Jan 26-28, 2026—PROS Course
**Virtual ICAT Training**
Virtual

Jan 29-30, 2026—PROS Course
**Risk-Based IOSA Training**
Virtual

Mar 9-11, 2026—PROS Course
**Airline Safety Management System (SMS)**
Virtual

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