

MAILING ADDRESS/HEADQUARTERS

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(Flying Tigers - Buffalo Airport)
Olean, NY
(Olean General Hospital)
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Genesee County / Batavia, NY

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Statement Regarding Safety Concerns Associated with Windmills and Towers in Helicopter Operations

Issued by: Mercy Flight Inc.

September 23, 2016

Mercy Flight Inc. operates three helicopter air ambulance bases to serve the medical evacuation needs of the communities of Western New York. These bases are located in Buffalo, Batavia and Olean, and are staffed 24/7 for rapid response. At night, the helicopter flight crews utilize night vision goggles (NVGs) for enhanced safety.

Our local flying area has numerous towers and windmills that affect our flight planning and the altitudes at which we operate. Our typical flight profile is 1,000-2,000 feet above ground level (AGL) in cruise flight. At a minimum we are required to fly at 500 feet AGL for noise abatement in unpopulated areas. Takeoff and landing require us to penetrate the 500 feet AGL cruise restriction and place us closer to towers and obstacles. Due to the nature of our mission, we land at off-airport sites to pick up trauma and urgent-care patients. These sites are chosen as close as possible to the patient location, and are often unfamiliar to our pilots. We require for our landing zone, a minimum of 100 feet by 100 feet, with the approach and departure areas clear of obstacles to operate safely. Any obstructions in the immediate area need to be relayed to the flight crew for hazard avoidance prior to landing.

Wires from power lines, guy wires on towers, unlit towers, and windmills are extremely difficult to see at night even with NVGs. Towers and windmills that do not have appropriate NVG compatible lighting are also challenging for the flight crews. Mercy Flight has several concerns for communities and construction companies to consider when installing structures such as windmills and towers, to mitigate the risk to helicopters:

The coordinates (latitude and longitude) of newly constructed towers and windmills should be relayed to Mercy Flight as early as possible for us to plot on our hazards map. The lighting and obstacle notifications to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) can take longer to process and update on aviation charts and publications.

Lighting on obstacles taller than 200 feet AGL must be NVG compatible and must meet FAA requirements.

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Towers less than 200 feet AGL are not required to be lighted by FAA requirements, however, Mercy Flight strongly urges municipalities to require that at least NVG compatible lighting be installed on any tower over 150 feet in height. The recent trend has been to build towers between 190 to 199 feet AGL to avoid the FAA lighting requirement. Although this may be the preference of construction companies and property owners, it creates a serious hazard to helicopter operations in the vicinity. Any tower near a potential landing zone should receive consideration for lighting. LED lighting is NVG compatible, is relatively inexpensive to install, and operates with very low power consumption. Reflective tape should also be used to augment the lighting on the shorter towers.

Windmills and windmill farms are important to have plotted on our hazard maps. All lighting should be functional and exact heights known to safely operate air ambulance flights in the area. Windmill blades pose an additional hazard as they are not illuminated and can extend up to 150 feet higher than the tower structure. Knowing exactly where the windmills are and having them properly lit is a key safety concern. We are able to land within a windmill farm for flight requests but the landing area and nearby hazards have an increased risk level that must be mitigated with thorough communication and reconnaissance prior to landing. Also, the density of the windmills will require higher overflight at times to meet FAA regulatory requirements. Our typical air ambulance flight is direct to the requested location then direct to a medical facility offering a higher level of care. The placement of a windmill farm may require some deviations to a direct flightpath, depending on the weather and time of day.

Safety is our highest priority, and the identification and illumination of windmills, towers and similar obstacles are critical to our success. Please contact me for any additional information.

Sincerely,

Marc H. Boies
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