Aerial Agricultural Association of Australia

Powerlines Policy

March 2011

Introduction

Powerlines present a threat to legal low-level aviation including aerial application—one that has caused the majority of aerial application accidents and the deaths of many pilots.

AAAA has developed this policy so as to inform regulators, asset developers and operators alike of the need for action on their part to fulfill their duty of care to Australia's aerial applicators.

AAAA Powerlines Policy

AAAA recommends:

- **The Commonwealth mandate a powerline safety program for all owners and operators of powerlines that would minimize the risks to legitimate low-level aviation and which would feature:**
- **The mandatory marking of powerlines in areas of aerial application and firebombing activity**
- **A national web-based database and mapping system, accessible by pilots, that would accurately identify the position of all powerlines and relevant infrastructure.**
- **The placement either underground, or aligned with paddock boundaries or road easements, of all new powerlines and powerlines being repaired in areas of aerial application and firebombing activity.**
- **Electricity network owners and operators should not be able to refuse the aerial agricultural industry permission to operate around powerlines, including flying under them where appropriate, as this is often the safer option.**
- **Electricity network owners and operators should be required by legislation to consult with landholders and aerial operators when proposing to construct a new powerline in farming areas, and to pay compensation to the farmer where this results in increased costs of aerial application as a result of forcing changes to flight paths.**
- If unable to put powerlines underground, electricity network owners and operators should be required to mark powerlines in farming areas so as to make them more easily identifiable to pilots..

Background

Most agricultural land in Australia is criss-crossed with powerlines and aerial application companies and pilots put enormous effort into managing these hazards safely, generally using a risk identification, assessment and management process in line with Australian Standard AS4360/ISO 30000.

The agricultural pilot curriculum mandated by CASA includes training for the safe management of powerlines and AAAA has been active in providing ongoing professional development for application pilots that includes a focus on planning, risk management and a knowledge of human factors relevant to managing powerlines in a low-level aviation environment.

AAAA runs a specific training course for aerial application pilots entitled *'Wire Risk Management'* to address these issues.

Every aerial application mission is planned to take account of the threat of powerlines and to manage then as safely as possible while still applying the essential chemicals to protect the crop.

In terms of due diligence, the aerial application industry is doing everything it can to reduce the risk of hitting powerlines.

This is in stark comparison to the very lax, on occasions hostile attitude of powerline companies to the threat their powerlines pose to aviation operations being conducted legally and under the regulation of CASA.

In some cases, the powerline companies' ongoing refusal to provide to aerial application companies the detailed mapping of the position of their network or to mark their wires to make them easier to see, is negligent.

Certainly, the courts (*Sheather v Country Energy*, NSW Court of Appeals) have found that powerline companies do owe a duty of care to all pilots and should mark their powerlines where they are an obvious threat to aviation safety.

AAAA has worked very successfully with one powerline company with coverage of most of NSW - Country Energy - on the development of a cheap and simple powerline marker that can help pilots keep visual contact with the position of powerlines in and around treatment areas.

Unfortunately, these markers are not used in other States, although AAAA notes that Ergon Energy, with coverage of much of Queensland, has recently introduced the same markers and this may improve safety, although take-up rates are still very low.

AAAA's was involved in the Australian Standards Committee for the review of AS 3891 - Marking of Cables and their Supporting Structures.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to secure a significantly improved approach to the marking of powerlines, especially in relation to low level aviation and lowering any thresholds for the mandatory marking of powerlines, such as long spans across valleys etc that have previously caused fatalities. However, a useful risk management approach was included in the standard to encourage landowners to consider the marking of wires in areas of known low level aviation activity. The key aim of the review was achieved however, and that was to permit the markers developed by Country Energy to be use legitimately under the Australian Standard which previously had no provision for them.

Agricultural areas and areas of probable bushfire activity would be two obvious places where powerline companies should be exercising their court-defined duty of care and marking powerlines so as to assist aerial agricultural and fire-bombing pilots manage another risk in an already hostile aviation environment.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like more information on the vital and responsible role the aerial application industry plays:

www.aerialag.com.au

Or contact us on:
02 6241 2100 ph.

phil@aerialag.com.au

AAAA
PO BOX 353
Mitchell ACT 2911