



RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Jennifer Rodi
Air Safety Investigator
Central Region

Person Contacted: Mike Foster – State Director (Wyoming)
NTSB Accident Number: CEN17FA050

Narrative:

During the conversation, Mr. Foster stated the following:

Mr. Foster has been in his position as a State Director/Wildlife Biologist for the state of Wyoming for 2 years. Prior to this position he was a district supervisor in the state of Montana. He has been certified as a gunner for the program. His current responsibilities include the management of three districts. This includes the supervision of the pilots based in Wyoming; 5 fulltime pilots and one contract helicopter pilot. There were 6 pilots at the time of the accident.

The pilots are based with their airplanes; Rock Springs, Riverton, Worland, Hulett, and Casper. There are currently 2 airplanes owned by the Wyoming Wool Growers Association and 3 airplanes federally owned. The airplanes are either Top Cubs or Supercubs. Each airplane is assigned to a base and does not rotate amongst the bases. The accident airplane had been in service for a month prior to the accident. Prior to this airplane, the pilot and gunner had been flying in another airplane equipped identically to the accident airplane.

Pilot training is scheduled and provided by the training center in Cedar City, Utah. The 100-hour maintenance is also scheduled and managed by the office in Cedar City; the base pilot will ferry the airplane to the appropriate shop for maintenance as required. Mr. Foster noted no issues with the maintenance provided.

Just prior to the accident the pilots attended a safety conference in Cedar City, Utah. The pilots were excited when they returned to work and reported a good conference. The accident flight was the first flight following the conference.

The pilots in the program are in a salaried position – they are not compensated per flight or for any capture during a mitigation flight. The decision to fly lies solely with the pilot. The pilots around the state call in every morning to check in. Personnel in the Casper office track the flights during business hours Monday through Friday. Spot trackers are used every 15 minutes before 0800 and all day Saturday. Rarely do the pilots fly on Sunday or after 1400 in the afternoon.

Mr. Belden started in the program as a gunner. He was a fully qualified pilot and started flying for the program in March of 2016. He was under a “training” program for a year and would only fly with Mr. Hausner. Anytime Mr. Foster interacted or spoke with Mr. Belden, Mr. Belden was excited and grateful for the opportunity to fly with the program. He never expressed any concerns or doubts about the airplane or a flight.

Mr. Hausner was qualified as both a pilot and a gunner and served as an instructor pilot for the region. He had been with the organization for 30 plus years and had been flying as a pilot for the organization for 20 plus years. While providing the training for Mr. Belden, Mr. Hausner only expressed praise for Mr. Belden’s performance. He did not express any concerns about Mr. Belden. In the past he had expressed a minor concern about the older airplanes; this is one reason that the airplane they were flying was replaced with the accident airplane.

The ground crew that worked with Mr. Belden and Mr. Hausner did not report any concerns to Mr. Foster.



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Person Contacted: Lloyd Burraston – National Aviation Manager
NTSB Accident Number: CEN17FA050

Narrative:

During the conversation, Mr. Burraston stated the following:

Mr. Burraston is the National Aviation Program Coordinator (which includes the position of the Training Center Manager) for the USDA and has held this position since 2016. His responsibilities include flight instruction, check airman, pilot oversight, field crewmember training and oversight, and program standardization. In 2005 he accepted the position as the Training Center Manager. In 2016 both positions were combined as a result of budget shortfall. The training center was established in 2003. Prior to working in the training center, he was a regional area manager based in Fort Collins, Colorado, and held that position between 1999 and 2005. He was a line pilot for 14 years prior to that post, based in Delta, Utah.

The training center trained between 200 and 300 crewmembers a year – between 2 and 3 every week.

Pilots were capped at 700 hours a year and averaged 500 hours a year. The total flight time of their pilots averaged between 10,000 and 13,000 hours; a few pilots had over 20,000 hours. He estimated that they employed 35 pilots – some pilots were seasonal providing their services between October and May. There were 5 pilots in Wyoming at the time of the accident.

Mr. Belden and Mr. Hausner were fulltime pilots; Mr. Belden was filling a position in Riverton once he had completed his training. The turnover or attrition in the pilot program was low.

The training center utilized both a Top Cub and a Decathlon for flight training; specifically, for their stall and spin training ability. He stated that the Decathlon was important for vortices

recovery training. During a tracking turn, if the pilot does not follow procedures they can catch their own vortices.

Mr. Burraston flew with Mr. Belden in May of 2016 as part of his initial pilot training. He had no concerns with his flight performance or capability. He characterized Mr. Belden as very calm and never excited.

Outside of the training center, Mr. Hausner was the only pilot/flight instructor/crewmember who flew with Mr. Belden. Mr. Hausner would call in to the training center every two weeks. He always had positive reports and praise regarding Mr. Belden's performance. No concerns were ever voiced. Mr. Belden would call in every three weeks. He never expressed any concerns or issues during these calls. He estimated that Mr. Hausner had between 21,000 and 22,000 hours of flight time. Mr. Belden had logged between 1,600 and 1,700 hours of flight time.

For the last 400 hours Mr. Hausner flew from the rear seat as both a flight instructor and crewmember. The airplane was equipped with dual controls so that the instructor could take control at any time. It was the instructor's responsibility to take over if needed, and ensure the run and escape route were set up properly. He commented that it would be very unlikely that Mr. Hausner would allow the run to set up into rising terrain.

Mr. Burraston stated that the procedures coming off a target included initiating a climb, leveling the airplane, and then turning to the left.

The flight program was shut down after the accident while an internal investigation could be conducted. Two boards of review were held – one internal board and one external board. Two recommendations made by the review were an audio angle of attack indicator and a stick shaker.



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Person Contacted: Scott Jensen – Flight Instructor Training Officer
NTSB Accident Number: CEN17FA050

Narrative:

During the conversation, Mr. Jensen stated the following:

Mr. Jensen has been with the USDA in Utah for about 10 years. During this time, he has always been responsible for the flight training program for all of the program pilots. Prior to working in Utah, he flew as a line pilot in Nevada for 8 to 9 years conducting similar duties to the accident flight – aerial wildlife hazard mitigation. Prior to this Mr. Jensen spent 4 years in the Army.

Mr. Jensen oversees the flight training (both initial and recurrent) of all USDA pilots. The initial training program is 40 hours over 2 weeks conducted in Cedar City, Utah. On average, 2 new pilots will go through the training program each year. The program attempts to have pilots come in for recurrent training every 6 months; no pilot will go past a year without recurrent training. In general, Mr. Jensen conducts all of the training flights with the pilots and Mr. Burraston conducts all of the phase checks with the pilots

Mr. Jensen estimated that there are 23 fulltime fixed-wing pilots and between 8 and 10 helicopter pilots for the program. He stated that there are an additional 10 to 12 contract fixed-wing pilots and 25 to 30 contract helicopter pilots. The pilots are located in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Texas. Their flight experience ranges between 5,000 and 35,000 hours. Pilots are compensated with an annual salary and they receive their pay regardless of the number of flights or flight-hours conducted. Pilots do not receive additional compensation or bonus associated with the number mitigations conducted during each flight.

Mr. Jensen is not involved in the pilot selection process. The pilots are selected by the state according to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) standards. During the selection process

they may demonstrate their flight skills during a flight with the National Aviation Program Coordinator.

Mr. Jensen elaborated on the flight training program and explained that pilots spend time in their full motion simulator before flying in the Decathlon. The first few lessons include the review of preflight preparations, weight and balance calculations, preflight briefings, and upper airwork. The upper airwork includes stalls – Mr. Jensen demonstrates the first stall and then the pilots practice the stalls to an acceptable level. He stated that generally it takes the pilot 2 to 3 lessons to meet acceptable standards for stall recognition and recovery. Specifically, they are looking for stall recognition at the buffet and then the proper recovery demonstration when the stall breaks completely. Stalls are practiced to a full stall so that the pilot can demonstrate the ability to recover properly if the airplane ever does stall during operations. In addition, stalls while looking out the side and rear windscreen are practiced similar to tracking operations while on a flight. Slow flight, around 40 miles per hour, is also practiced with shallow bank heading changes from 90 to 360 degrees.

The USDA has a non-punitive safety reporting program through the Aviation Safety Officer in Cedar City, Utah. Mr. Jensen felt confident in the ability to report any safety issues or concerns, with either pilots or airplanes, to the safety officer. He felt that any concern voiced would have been addressed. He was not aware of any concerns about either the pilot or the airplane.

Risk assessments were conducted on a daily basis at each base. Operations were only conducted during the day in good weather with good visibility. Winds were limited at 15 miles per hour or lower in mountainous terrain and 20 miles per hour in flat terrain. The self-assessment of the pilot was not formal; however, during training it was emphasized that the mission did not drive the flight operations, the predator did not fly the airplane. “Get home safe.”

There are 5 airplanes operating in the state of Wyoming; 2 owned by grazing boards and 3 owned by the federal government. Mr. Jensen stated that aircraft configuration is the same for all of the airplanes; however, each base has their own airplane and they are not rotated.

Mr. Belden completed his initial training in Cedar City, Utah, on May 27, 2016. He also flew with the Mr. Belden for an hour prior to the safety stand down in November of 2016. When asked, Mr. Jensen stated that Mr. Belden was one of the best pilots to come through the program. He was characterized as level-headed, with good character. He had a lower experience level than most pilots who come through the program. Mr. Jensen had no concerns during either the initial or recurrent training. He commented that if anything, Mr. Belden’s skills had improved with the 300-400 hours of experience he had gained since his initial training. Mr. Jensen was not aware of any concerns voiced by anyone else in the program.

The annual pilot safety stand down meeting was held the week prior to the accident. This was the first opportunity for the other pilots in the program to meet with and interact with Mr. Belden. No one expressed or voiced any concerns about Mr. Belden.

Mr. Belden was still in his one-year training program and was required to fly with a program flight instructor, in an airplane equipped with dual flight controls, for one year. Mr. Hausner was a program flight instructor and was assigned to fly with Mr. Belden for his year training period.

Mr. Jensen stated that the terrain near Cedar City, where Mr. Belden was trained, was similar to the terrain where the accident happened. He stated that the surveillance aspect of a flight is conducted between 75 and 100 feet above ground level. A predator mitigation pass would be conducted at an altitude between 20 feet and 40 feet, at an airspeed between 60 and 70 miles per hour. He stated that pilots generally track their target out the side and rear windscreen. The crew member is positioned to shoot from the left side of the airplane and the pilot always positions the airplane so that the target is on the left side. Most maneuvering turns are conducted to the left; however, terrain and environment dictate the need to make a turn to the right.

Mr. Jensen also provided the following details on the USDA APHIS program via an email.

All pilots (Wildlife Services and Contract) who are approved for WS operations will hold and have in their possession at least:

A valid and current Commercial Pilot Certificate with the proper ratings for the equipment to be used; and

A valid Instrument Pilot Certificate (fixed-wing only), and

A valid and current Class 1 or Class 2, FAA medical certificate.

All pilots (Wildlife Services and Contract) conducting WS aerial operations must meet these minimum requirements:

1,500 hours total time in helicopter or fixed-wing;

250 hours PIC time in helicopter or fixed-wing;

100 hours in the preceding 12 months in helicopter or fixed-wing; and

75 hours night time in helicopter or fixed-wing.

These are Office of Personnel Management (OPM) GS 2181 pilot series minimum standards.

Pilots are hired by State Directors in individual states.

All new hire pilots are required to pass a training course in Cedar City, UT. Consisting of a minimum 40 hours flight instruction and 60 hours ground instruction.

Grant Belden was in our Pilot Training Program which required him to have all of the above. He was also required to fly with a Wildlife Services CFI in an aircraft equipped with dual controls installed for a period of one year. During this period, Grant was also required to travel to Cedar City for intermittent phase checks. In addition, Grant had stall/spin awareness training in our Decathlon in May of 2016.

All pilots are required to pass a yearly Proficiency Flight Review administered at the Aviation Training and Operations Center or in the field administered by myself or a Wildlife Services CFI.