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Date: March 12, 2026

Subject: WPR26LA118 / Record of Conversation

Contact: [REDACTED], commercial pilot in command

On March 12, 2026, at 8:30 AM Pacific Time, I conducted a telephone interview with [REDACTED] concerning NTSB case WPR26LA118, a hot air balloon accident in Casa Grande, Arizona for which he was the pilot flying. The commercial pilot stated that he was conducting a commercial sightseeing balloon operation with passengers. They launched at sunrise and were traveling at about four or five miles per hour, coming up to the Casa Grande Mountain. The balloon was on a heading of 355 degrees and the pilot wanted to change to a heading of 030 degrees. He had been ascending and descending three, four, or five hundred feet to catch different wind currents at different altitudes, and was descending with the intent to navigate toward open land on the east (far) side of I-10.

As they approached the Casa Grande Mountain, he believed he was high enough to cross over it. He was off to the side of the mountain when he said he felt wind hit the top of the balloon, pushing it down. He stated he had three burners actively running to try to climb or maintain altitude but was unable to overcome the downdraft. The balloon touched down on the ground and struck a rock. The rock broke the wood skid, which in turn broke the U-tube on the basket.

Before the flight, the pilot conducted a safety briefing with the passengers, covering different types of landings, procedures, and what could happen. As they were coming close to the impact point, he knew they would possibly touch down, so he instructed everyone to turn around and sit down as they had been briefed previously. He noted that the basket is designed to protect the occupants. One passenger did not comply and remained standing to see what was happening. When the basket impacted the ground, the standing passenger travelled forward due to the

momentum. The pilot reached over, grabbed him by the shoulder, and pulled him back. The passenger hit his elbow on a fuel tank during the sequence.

After impacting the rock, the balloon rose back up in the air because the air in the envelope was heated following use of the three burners. The pilot said he leveled off the aircraft and assessed the situation, checking on the passengers. The passenger who had hit his elbow was complaining about the pain. Another passenger complained about being bumped around while seated in the basket.

He then flew on to a safe landing spot. At one point, he noted the balloon's ground speed was as high as 17 miles per hour. He knew if he flew on a bit further to some fields, the ground speed would drop to six miles per hour, or possibly lower. He executed a "stand-up" landing at the chosen location, while traveling at approximately four to five miles per hour.

Regarding the damaged basket components, he explained that he elected not to repair it after the accident due to the damage to the skid and the U-tubes. The basket was a single-T design with passengers located on both sides and a pilot compartment. He decided to take the basket out of service and replace it with a "double-T" basket. When asked to explain the damaged components, he described the U-tube as a part that comes around the bottom of the basket and holds the poles for the burners. He also clarified that cables connected to the balloon run along these U-tubes. He said that a damaged U-tube alone would not likely cause a failure, but he wanted to ensure everything was safe and get to a large landing area. He explained that the broken skid was a wooden skid located on the bottom of the basket, which cracked when it hit the rock. No other structural damage occurred.

He attributed the surprise downdraft to "morning drainage" or possibly "a little rotor" related to mountain wave winds. He had believed he was high enough based on experience flying in the area, yet after crossing over the terrain the balloon's speed increased from four or five to seventeen miles per hour as it sunk. The wind eventually calmed again to four to five miles per hour after passing the hill and crossing over some fields. When asked to define "morning drainage," he described it as a wind shift resulting from temperature changes, which can cause an increase in wind speed.

He further confirmed he always provides a pre-flight safety briefing to all passengers, and that he did so on this flight. He stated he went over it twice, including a second time in the air when he notified the passengers that they had picked up some speed and the landing would probably be what they practiced for, which he called a "seat landing."