

New “Ceiling and Visibility” Tool Unveiled For HEMS Operations

Early in 2006, as part of the ongoing efforts of its Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS) taskforce; the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) sponsored a HEMS Weather Summit, in Boulder, Colorado. At this meeting, helicopter operators and representatives of HAI and its affiliate member organizations AAMS and NEMSPA, were briefed on recent additions to the wealth of information available on the Aeronautical Digital Data Service (ADDS).

Participants were also given a preview of other new weather reporting and assessment tools in various stages of development by the weather gurus at the University Coalition for Aeronautical Research (UCAR), and the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR). In turn, industry representatives provided input to the FAA and the weather researchers about the kind of weather tools needed to improve safety.

A frequently recurring observation of the industry participants in the Summit was the need for more access to information to support better weather decision-making in Visual Flight Rules (VFR) operations. In particular, it was agreed that the absence of usable ceiling and visibility data between reporting and forecasting stations was a major problem. Existing aviation routine weather (METAR) reporting sites are irregularly spaced around the country, leaving huge gaps in many areas with no nearby weather reporting or data input of any kind. Often entire HEMS flights are conducted in the area between such stations, forcing operators to use off-course stations and area forecasts to make critical flight planning decisions.

We were assured that UCAR, through its Research Applications Laboratory (RAL), was developing

a tool on the ADDS experimental Web site which would provide access to “gridded” ceiling and visibility assessments in areas between METAR and terminal areal forecast (TAF) reporting/forecasting sites. However, the new tool was not expected to be ready for release until May 2007, at the earliest.

At the request of the industry representatives, the FAA representatives who hosted the summit, Hooper Harris, Manager of the FAA's Commuter, On Demand, and Training Center Branch (AFS-250) and Larry Buehler, Aviation Safety Inspector (AFS-250), made a commitment to explore the possibility of accelerating the timetable for getting the C&V weather tool ready and on line—hopefully in time for the 2006 winter flying season.

The FAA kept its end of the commitment and UCAR and RAL got the job done!

On November 1, 2006, the Aviation Digital Data Service (ADDS) unveiled a new experimental Ceiling and Visibility weather tool specifically designed for the kind of low-level flight operations conducted routinely by Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS) operators. The FAA moved quickly and just two weeks later, on November 14, published guidance material (Notice N 8000.33) allowing principal operations inspectors (POIs) to approve the use of the new ADDS HEMS C&V weather tool for Part 135 certificate holders conducting HEMS operations.

A Gridded Ceiling and Visibility Assessment.

As described in the FAA order, “The ceiling and visibility data provided by the new HEMS tool, is an “assessment,” meaning, it is a determination of the ceiling and visibility conditions likely to exist in the grid block based on a technical assessment of conditions,


observations, forecasting models, and terrain influences. It is not a report of an observation, or a forecast. It is an assessment of the ceiling and visibility at the time chosen by the user and at the location of the grid block(s).”

The ADDS HEMS Tool allows the user to identify gridded weather assessments in 5 km X 5 km blocks. The weather data available includes flight category, ceiling, visibility, radar, convection, icing, temperature, relative humidity, and wind. Overlays on the graphical data include wind barbs, METARs, PIREPs, AIRMETS/SIGMETs, TAFs, VORs, state and county boundaries, and a basemap of terrain and cultural information.

This data is available on the ADDS Experimental Site at www.weather.aero/hems.

Since the new ceiling and visibility tool is still considered an “experimental” product, it cannot be used to support IFR operations. The only approved use of this tool is in VFR operations and then only in the context of supporting a “no-go” decision. Nonetheless, HAI encourages all HEMS operators to become familiar with the new weather tool at www.weather.aero/hems.

As Harris put it, “You know, if this tool keeps one or two guys from launching when they shouldn't, it will be quite a payback for the time, effort, and money spent on this project.”

Harris also encouraged HEMS users of the new product to provide feedback on how to make the new system “work better for them..... UCAR-RAL needs to know.” HAI thanks the FAA for listening and congratulates UCAR, NCAR and RAL for a job well done. 

David York is Vice President of Regulations and International Affairs for HAI.



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HAI to Recognize Six New Members to the Platinum Program of Safety at HELI-EXPO 2007

The following new Regular Members who have demonstrated their commitment to flying to a higher standard, will be recognized at the HAI Annual General Membership Meeting and Breakfast at HELI-EXPO 2007. The six new Platinum Program of Safety participants are:

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