



following the introduction of its EC135 light twin, regarded as one of the quietest aircraft in production, and for which it has received about 120 orders to date.

The industry believes that the growing concerns over aircraft noise and public safety are two prominent factors affecting the future growth of the helicopter industry as a whole. Manufacturers have responded and are now introducing technology to "greatly reduce helicopter noise".

Eurocopter concedes that the tail rotor designs of its EC135 and the NOTAR system on the Boeing models has gone a long way to address this problem. Jan Willem Stuurman, chief executive of the European Helicopter Association (EHA) maintains, however, that manufacturers are now constantly trying to find ways to upgrade technology while keeping the cost of the machine as low as possible.

"There is a constant battle to juggle increased capability and price," he says. According to Bell's Barbour, "...customers will buy what they care about at a price they are willing to pay. We try to satisfy the the broad range of customers, and on the whole, expensive and quiet does not sell as well."

EHA believes that both the noise and safety concerns are placing a strain on the corporate helicopter industry in Europe. It maintains that operations are being curtailed by some national aviation authorities who are denying operators the freedom to fly within the European Union (EU), particularly across national borders, and also by the EU's inadequate number of landing sites. "There is little doubt that corporate helicopters can increase the efficiency of business links and the movement of people within Europe. Expansion in the use of helicopters for this role is hindered, however, by the absence of a suitable infrastructure and operating sites within the EU," says Stuurman.

FEWER JOURNEYS

The Amsterdam-based association reveals that annual helicopter movements in Paris have declined from 55,000 to 22,000 in 30 years. Furthermore, in the UK, London is "struggling" to gain a second "much needed" heliport to add to the one in Battersea, which now accommodates 9,000 movements a year.

EHA also fears that the implementation of the Joint Aviation Authorities JAR OPS 3 in April 1999 (whereby all helicopter operations will be forced to comply with the same requirements across the EU) may lead to unnecessary restrictions on helicopter operations. "We are a great supporter of standardised regulation, but we have to be aware of over-regulation, which restricts the flexibility and drives up the costs of helicopters certification and helicopter operations," it says.

The association believes that there should be a balance between noise, safety, and economics, given that the majority of the 4,000 helicopters that are registered in the EU are "older types".



Public heliports in the USA are under threat. One in four in New York has closed in the past year

"The introduction of realistic noise certification and improved design methods and technologies will ensure that new helicopters are quieter. However, the existing fleet of helicopters will continue to operate for some time," it adds. Operators are being urged to adopt HAI's "Fly Neighbourly" programme, which urges pilots to avoid flight at low altitudes, particularly over noise-sensitive areas, and to follow routes which will "minimise noise impact."

In the USA the growing concerns over helicopter noise and safety has also led to airspace restrictions, particularly over national parks, including the Grand Canyon, and has led to the closure of some publicly owned heliports and landing sites.

According to HAI the total number of heli-



Manufacturers are looking at fractional ownership programmes to boost sales

pads accessible to the public in the USA has fallen from 214 in 1989 to 183 in 1998. The association maintains that in the past year one out of four New York-based heliports, which account for a combined total 150,000 of annual operations, has closed down, while the future of one other landing site is in doubt.

"If heliports continue to close, this will have a chilling effect on the industry - helicopters will be forced to land at airports, and will then lose their attraction for a prospective corporate user," says Resavage.

Both Resavage and Stuurman concede that the poor public image of helicopters is restricting their use in corporate and public transport. "If the helicopter does not gain public acceptance, there is little prospect of achieving provision for the necessary infrastructure which will allow for an expansion in the use helicopters," says Stuurman.

FRACTIONAL POTENTIAL

The increasing popularity of helicopters as a corporate tool has prompted the majority of manufacturers to explore fractional ownership possibilities in the hope of emulating the success of the existing business aircraft programmes. Eurocopter, Sikorsky and Bell are openly holding "discussions" with unnamed operators, one of which is believed to be the UK's First Heli Network (FHN), which is scheduled to take delivery of its first two JetRangers by the end of the year, along with an order for a Model 427 and 430.

"Fractional ownership offers all the proven benefits of modern helicopters without the burden of ownership," says the FHN's group managing director Tony Easton. "The programme operates like any other. However, for obvious logistical reasons, we cannot offer guaranteed availability," he adds. The Osmington Mills, Dorset, UK-based company, which has already signed up 16 customers, expects corporate helicopter use to increase at a "staggering rate" as people begin to realise their potential.

FHN recently conducted a survey to examine travelling habits of 34 top executives. It revealed that the executives spent a combined total of about 34 months a year travelling by rail, road and/or train. "The research found that by using a helicopter these executives would save a [combined] total of 13 months a year [in transit]," says Easton.

The company is planning to set up strategic alliances with two or three operators in some chosen countries. "We will franchise FHN around the world and plan to have about 10 companies in place by 2000," adds Easton. FHN also plans to operate a fleet of 24 aircraft in 36 months which will also include the Agusta A109 Power and Bell 407. It plans to add the 609 tiltrotor to its fleet when it enters service.

"The 609 will become an integral part of our programme - it will transform the corporate helicopter market in the next century," concedes Easton. □