HELI-EXPO PREVIEW

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For the first time, the Helicopter Association International's Heli-Expo will be held in Louisville, Ky., a new city for the world's largest rotorcraft show. The main exhibition days for this year's Heli-Expo are March 1-3, but the show begins with HAI Professional Education Courses at the Kentucky International Convention Center on February 26. Arrivals of helicopters for the exhibits begin on February 27 and will wrap the following day.

"We are ahead quite a bit on hotel room reservations from last year," said HAI president and CEO Matt Zuccaro, although the challenges facing the oil and gas industry have caused some slowing of helicopter activity, including cutbacks in orders of new rotorcraft. More than a month before the opening of Heli-Expo, he added, "We're pretty much matched with previous shows in terms of key indicators: pre-registrations and course registrations and exhibitor square feet. We're hoping to keep up the trend for the last four or five years, where each show was better than the previous one."

Zuccaro is well used to questions about why HAI selected Louisville for this year's show, and he is enthusiastic about the choice. "When you look at cities like we do, we look at what environment it has, what kind of activities does the host city provide and how much of a partner it is. Louisville has been phenomenal in hospitality with us and our members; it rolled out the red carpet. [The venue is] an excellent convention center, with everything we need in terms of physical structure, the show floor plan and protocols and the meeting space.

"Louisville is full of exciting venues and restaurants," Zuccaro said, and as it is the host for the annual Kentucky Derby at the Churchill Downs racetrack, "I think we can take comfort that they can handle Heli-Expo. [Many members] say their main motivator is going places they haven't been

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before. There's quite a buzz, and people are excited. You're going to love it. We got to love it these last couple of years. The city grows on you, and people are unbelievably hospitable."

The theme of this year's Heli-Expo is celebrating the champions of vertical aviation, and attendees are invited to do so at the annual Salute to Excellence Awards Dinner on March 2 at 7 p.m. at the Louisville Marriott Downtown. AIN's own R. Randall Padfield (who retired at the end of 2014) will be there to accept the Lightspeed Aviation Excellence in Communications award.

As always, Heli-Expo is all about education, and there is no shortage this year of courses, including manufacturer technical briefings and the free Rotor Safety Challenge. This year there are 63 challenge education events, most just an hour long, but also some in-depth sessions that are longer. Those who attend at least six challenge events will receive a certificate of recognition. Most of the sessions take place March 1 and 2, but two events on February 29 are included: the HAI Safety Symposium–Usable Solutions for Your Safety Problems; and the Safety Directors Forum with senior NTSB and FAA managers–The Impact of Recent Accidents on the Helicopter Industry.

UAS INTEGRATION IN FOCUS

While Zuccaro expects some interesting announcements from helicopter manufacturers, new technology is a key focus for this year's Heli-Expo, especially the burgeoning unmanned aerial systems (UAS) industry. There is a general session on UAS, to be held March 2 at 8:30 a.m., and plenty of UAS-related exhibitors.

"We support the technology," Zuccaro said, "and we believe that helicopter operators are going to be one of the largest UAS operators. The logic to that is that UAS vertical-lift-mode vehicles are in fact going to interface with, complement and replace helicopters. Who better to understand vertical reference than helicopter operators? A lot of our members are developing UAS capabilities, and they are actively out there selling these services."

A key issue for HAI is that recreational users of these devices are flying them in airspace that is typically where rotorcraft work. "We're the ones at 500 feet and below doing all these missions," he explained "We're trying to promote educational programs for recreational users so they understand they are an aircraft operator and entering into an airspace environment and that they are aware of the rules and safety considerations."

Zuccaro added, "This is a watershed moment for the helicopter industry. Not only UAS but there are already tests under way with production helicopters without a pilot, flying cargo, external loads and firefighting. The concept of drones is definitely part of our future. We're looking to embrace it but also consider the safety implications."

Also on the safety front, Zuccaro expects the Heli-Expo show to stimulate discussion of HAI's new accreditation program, the Accredited Program of Safety (APS). This is a voluntary service for HAI members. HAI worked with the International Business Aviation Council to build an overlay suited to the helicopter industry on top of the International Standard for Business Aviation Operations (IS-BAO).

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“In the helicopter industry we have almost 55 missions that we do,” he said, “and each standard has to be defined for each mission. It’s not one standard; they’re all unique.” HAI helped developed these standards, and APSparticipants receive accreditation for the missions they fly. Accreditation will involve pre-qualification of the operator and going over the audit protocol via the Internet and on the telephone, followed by an audit in the field. “We’re hoping it contributes to enhanced safety and a reduction in accidents,” he said.

The APS program has generated keen interest, according to Zuccaro. “The operator has the flexibility to choose which mission it wants to be assessed in. Our responsibility is to come up with an auditor appropriate to the missions. We are mentors to our members, and we are going to work with them and assist them to achieve these standards.” Auditors will have to be IS-BAO recognized, and HAI is setting up an auditor-training program. “It’s a member service,” he explained. “We’ve established fixed pricing for audits. We are sensitive, and we know what it takes to turn rotors. We want to minimize the economic impact on operators to do this. It’s not a program developed as a revenue initiative for HAI. It’s a member service. We’re just trying to cover costs.”

The APS program fits with another recent initiative,Land and Live, which has seen growing success in encouraging helicopter pilots to land safely away from airports and heliports when conditions warrant. “People have told us they did that, and everything worked out fine,” Zuccaro said. “We noticed an increase in pilots doing safety landings for weather.” In one case a Black Hawk crew landed on a farm because of weather and ended up invited for dinner and to stay overnight until the weather cleared. “That’s what it’s all about,” he said. “This is good stuff, and we’re getting strong support from the industry.”

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