MORE BAD NEWS FOR AIRBUS HELICOPTERS SUPER PUMA FAMILY

News / Business aviation, Manufacturer



Airbus Helicopters' beleaguered Super Puma family has received more bad news as one of the type's biggest operators gained approval to shed the vast majority of its fleet and the Airbus Group chief executive detailed the scale of the grounding crisis.

CHC Helicopter on 15 July received permission from a Texas district court to reject leases on an initial tranche of 65 helicopters as it works through its planned Chapter 11 financial restructuring.

In total, the Vancouver, Canada-headquartered operator intends to cut 99 helicopters from its fleet: 86 on leases and 13 financed as part of a credit facility.

The vast majority of this total are Super Pumas – either H225s or older AS332 variants. Analysis of three separate court petitions shows that CHC plans to cut the H225 fleet to just five units from 40 at present, while AS332 numbers will shrink to 13 from 32.

A further hearing to consider the remaining 34 aircraft will be held on 4 August.

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CHC’s latest financial results, in which it recorded a $437 million full-year net loss, note that its plans “will remove from our fleet almost all H225 helicopters”.

Included within the total is the airframe destroyed in the 29 April fatal crash near Bergen Flesland airport operated by subsidiary CHC Helikopter Service.

Investigations into the accident led European regulators on 2 June to issue an emergency airworthiness directive grounding all civil H225s and AS332 L2s over fears about gearbox safety.

And Airbus Group chief executive Tom Enders, speaking during an investor presentation on 13 July, made clear the extent of the problem: around 80% of the Super Puma fleet was “now on the ground”, he said.

Enders says the impact is being felt both in terms of deliveries and in the support and aftermarket business. Around one-third of Airbus Helicopters’ near-€6 billion ($6.63 billion) annual revenue is accounted for by support activities, with around 10% of the total generated by the Super Puma family, he says.

However, the emergency airworthiness directive does not cover military variants of the helicopter and a number of countries, notably France, continue to operate their H225Ms.

For those operators, the manufacturer has mandated the “short-term withdrawal from service” of a specific type of second-stage planet gear – the part identified by Norwegian investigators – “to be managed through a retrofit programme”.

“This is aimed at improving the in-service behaviour of epicyclic modules and will provide increased reliability and safety across the fleet,” says the text of an emergency service bulletin.

Airbus Helicopters has given no timeline as to when the Super Puma fleet might return to service.

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