

Flying Around Animals

There are very few places in New Zealand where you don't need to worry about the effect of your flying on livestock.

The agricultural heli sector has been the source of a number of occurrences and aviation-related concerns over the years.

CAA aviation examiner Andy McKay can think of a number of instances where stock have been spooked by the noise or shadow created by an aircraft, and the consequences are nasty.

"Panicked horses running into fences breaking their legs, jumping fences, getting their feet wrapped in fences. Sheep darting out in front of aircraft on rural airstrips. Young animals and horses are the most at risk, although the worst example I witnessed in my career was a helicopter landing next to an ostrich farm. It was particularly messy."

Andy says a lot of issues occur around town and city boundaries.

"Rural land surrounding an urban area tends to comprise lifestyle properties, where you get a higher concentration of animals. We also see an increase in noise-related complaints around these boundaries."

Alan Beck, the CEO and chief pilot at Beck Helicopters in Taranaki, says small farms are worse because the stock have nowhere to run.

Andy says pilots who've grown up rurally tend to be more aware of the issues than somebody who's grown up in the city and is not used to being around animals.

Alan Beck agrees.

"The people that work in ag aviation are already well aware of the consequences if you put either the farmer's cows or the neighbours' cows through the fence. Urban pilots perhaps don't have that experience because they don't come across it as often as we do."

Andy says the risks can be higher depending on the season.

"In aviation, it's useful to know that in the north, lambing pretty much starts in late winter. In other parts of the country, they lamb a bit later because of the colder temperatures. That's relevant because lambs are a lot more flighty and the risk of mis-mothering (when a lamb is separated from its mother) is high. Someone with a rural background is going to be aware of that, whereas somebody from town probably hasn't even thought about it."

Reconnaissance

Andy says when landing any aircraft on a rural block you should always presume there are animals there until you've ascertained that there's not.



"You always need to do a proper reconnaissance looking for obstacles, including animals."

He says you should ring ahead and arrange for there to be no animals on the land if practical.

"If you're landing anywhere that has a boundary of trees, in summer the animals could be there in the shade and you might not be able to see them. As you suddenly come in, the noise may disturb them.

"It's just awareness. For example, being alert if there's a pony club meet on – be aware of your surroundings."

Think of the neighbours

Andy says a pilot might land two paddocks away from a herd of horses, thinking that's far enough for safety, but despite that distance, the horses are still spooked.

"In addition to being aware of where you're going to in the immediate vicinity, you also need to cast your eyes around to see whether there are horses or animals being disturbed in the distance and then make a graceful exit if you have to."

Alan, who's one of New Zealand's most experienced agricultural and specialist lift pilots, says each farm can have multiple neighbours.

"So you've got to work out how you're going to do an approach. You don't just glue your eye on the farm you're landing on, you look at where all the stock are."

Davin Mudford is the chief pilot at Heli A1 in the Waikato and on the committee of the NZ Agricultural Aviation Association.

He says ringing ahead and talking to the farmer or land owner in advance is key.

"You're always talking to farmers; it's flying neighbourly. Just having a big look around if there are horses, and so on.

Probably horses are the worst because when you spook them they take a long time to calm down.

"And let the neighbours know. The other day we had to work right next door to horse stables. We let them know we were coming and they put them all in the stables and it was fine. So it's communication," says Davin.

Approach with caution

Alan's main message is to take it easy and work out how you're going to do an approach.

"If you're landing on an airstrip, come in slowly and do a big circuit and find out where the stock are. You'll handle the stock a lot better if you let it run around in a circle so that they don't all go into one area and smother (where animals, typically sheep, suffocate in a panicking mob), than if you just come roaring in to land."

He advises not to push stock downhill.

"If there are sheep at the top of the hill and you fly over them and push them to the bottom, they could smother. The same with cattle – if you push cattle, they'll go straight over the fence. Try to land where the cows can't see you."

Alan says if you're doing a topdressing job and the stock are all in one spot, let them spread out a bit and do that area last.

"If you come tearing in and someone's pet pony starts running, you've got to make a decision early whether you're going to circle around and let it get used to you, or retreat. Whenever possible, avoid that situation by getting the owner to put it in a small yard so it can't get up any speed and break its legs when it hits a fence." ■



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