

'Expert' had never reported on helicopter noise levels



Water wing ... an artist's impression of the barge, and its approved sites.

THE consultant employed to test the noise levels of helicopters for the controversial heliport on Sydney Harbour has admitted he is not an acoustic engineer and has never previously produced a report on helicopter noise.

Carl Holden, director of the noise testing company, Airport Friendly Solutions, also conceded that he had been wrong to describe himself as a member of the Australian Acoustics [sic] Society. The peak body, which is actually called the Australian Acoustical Society, told Fairfax Media Mr Holden has never been a member, although he used to subscribe to its magazine.

The first "noise assessment" report Mr Holden wrote for Newcastle Helicopters, the company planning to operate the heliport, has since been ridiculed by industry leaders and removed from the project's website. That report was produced in October. Mr Holden was also involved in acoustic tests from residences around the harbour hastily commissioned by Newcastle Helicopters this week as opposition to the project mounted.

The O'Farrell Government has been heavily criticised for failing to adequately check the heliport proposal, which was trumpeted by the Deputy Premier Andrew Stoner

last month as a boon for Sydney tourism.

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Roads and Maritime Services approved the heliport without a tender, without public consultation, without an Environmental Impact Statement and without testing for noise.

When Mr Stoner announced the heliport on November 20, he surprised both the public and even senior members of his own party, who had never been told about the decision.

The Premier on Thursday referred all inquiries to Mr Stoner, even though the licensing agency, Roads and Maritime Services, reports to Roads and Ports minister Duncan Gay.

The Deputy Premier now describes the heliport licence as a "trial", which alarmed one of the two co-directors of Newcastle Helicopters, James Guest, who has been trying to secure investors. Fairfax Media understands a crisis meeting was held on Thursday afternoon between Mr Guest and bureaucrats in Roads and Maritime Services.

The government placed no obligation on Newcastle Helicopters to carry out noise testing. Mr Guest said he hired an "independent acoustic consultant", Mr Holden's Airport Friendly Solutions, to test at Kirribilli and Cremorne Point to calm community anger.

Mr Guest told Fairfax Media that the noise from the helicopters was "basically imperceptible" from the nearest residences to the heliport - and he said his "quiet helicopter" registered fewer than 55 decibels, similar to a quiet office.

But senior acoustics consultants contacted by Fairfax Media had not heard of Mr Holden's outfit. Industry leader Steven Cooper, a principal of the Acoustic Group, who examined Mr Holden's initial noise assessment, said "it has so many errors in it that it says they can't be acoustic consultants".

Mr Cooper, who has noise-tested a previous proposal for a floating heliport on Sydney Harbour, added that he felt "professionally embarrassed that someone would lay claim to doing something as important as this and laying claim to expertise".

Mr Holden has arranged a meeting with Mr Cooper to get professional help on his report. Government ministers told Fairfax Media the noise findings did not matter as they were not required in the first place.

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