

## Heliport approved without safety check



Lacking regulation ... the harbour heliport. *Photo: Andrew Quilty*

THE NSW government approved the controversial floating heliport in Sydney Harbour before it had asked about air safety or air traffic control regulations, documents obtained by Fairfax Media reveal.

In late November the government approved Newcastle Helicopters to run a floating heliport on a moveable barge in the harbour, without preparing an environmental impact statement, testing for noise, consulting the public or putting the plan to tender.

Now two letters sent by the director of the maritime division of the Roads and Maritime Services department reveal the government had not yet asked for basic information about air traffic control and aviation safety when it made the decision.

On December 4 the director, Tony Middleton, wrote to the Civil Aviation Safety Authority asking whether the heliport required CASA approval, whether CASA monitored helicopter operations over the harbour and whether the helipad had to be a "minimum distance from residents and/or the shoreline".

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If there was no minimum distance, he asked "how is the impact of helicopter noise managed?" "What regulations apply to the operations of helicopters controlled over Sydney Harbour?" Mr Middleton inquired.

On the same day he wrote to Airservices Australia, which provides air traffic control, to ask whether it needed to approve or monitor helicopter operations over the harbour.

"Does such an operation require approval from Airservices Australia? Does Airservices Australia monitor helicopter operations over an area such as Sydney Harbour?" he asked.

Both letters acknowledge that Roads and Maritime Services, which had already approved a permit known as an aquatic licence, had "no jurisdiction over the helicopter services".

A spokesman for CASA told Fairfax Media his organisation would need to see "full details" of the proposed heliport operation because "a number of existing aviation safety requirements" would apply.

He said CASA would need to provide "detailed instructions" on the landing sites, including "suitable dimensions and clearance from obstacles". "In addition, aviation safety regulations prescribe certain distances from buildings and people for the starting and running of engines, including helicopter engines."

There were also weight restrictions, flights would have to be restricted to daylight hours in good visual conditions and could occur only "within designated helicopter lanes and float plane transit lanes, unless specifically approved by CASA".

CASA would also need to audit the helicopter operation to make sure safety standards were met.

A spokesman for Airservices Australia said that organisation would not have any involvement with the heliport as flights would be below 1000 feet, and therefore outside controlled airspace.

Public opposition to the decision has grown since its announcement, with residents worried about noise, environmental ramifications and safety.

The federal Liberal frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull has labelled the decision "reckless and undemocratic" and called for it to be rescinded. But he said he was not accusing the Premier, Barry O'Farrell, directly "as I have been advised that he was not privy to the decision which was taken administratively by the Roads and Maritime Services department without any consultation with him or with the cabinet.

"It is surely incredible that a group of bureaucrats would take it on themselves to grant helicopter landing rights, in the middle of Sydney Harbour, without any consultation with the general public," Mr Turnbull wrote on his blog.

The Roads and Ports Minister, Duncan Gay, has directed the department to review "how such proposals are assessed and regulated".

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