

Rotorcraft Industry Stronger Than Ever: HAI 2008 Heli-Expo

By Lisa A. Wright

The very nature of most helicopter missions makes demand for them to remain strong when the economy falls off, said the Helicopter Association International's (HAI) President Matt Zuccaro. "Everything is looking very positive. Vertical lift has finally made its way into every phase of life, and every segment of society has realized its value." When calamity strikes, he continues, people expect to see helicopter response. "I don't remember a time that's been as successful. We've had a great year in 2007 and anticipate we're going to have an even better one in 2008."

This year marked the 60th meeting of HAI and its Heli-Expo tradeshow. The first day included the opening ceremony, meetings, classes and a crowd of 15,557 attendees swarming into the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston, TX. The tradeshow featured 523 exhibits and static displays of 65 helicopters. Exhibitor space covered 252,700 feet and featured avionics, accessories, components and a variety of related products. Exhibitors reported high activity at their booths, and vendors were able to interact with thousands of consumers on the floor.

For example, American Eurocopter encountered tremendous enthusiasm for its new EC175, after it was unveiled on the showroom. Eurocopter sold 111 of these seven-ton helicopters during the three-day event. The company also took 120 orders for its other product lines. Of those, 43 helicopters will be used primarily for emergency evacuation and law enforcement missions. Lutz Bertling, president and CEO of Eurocopter stated, "After having reached record orders in 2007, the results that we have achieved at Heli-Expo prove that the market should remain strong in 2008."

Bell Helicopter displayed its new 429 model aircraft, which should be fully certified by year's end. The company already has 250 letters of intent to purchase the aircraft. Also, in the near future, look for a new configuration for the light 407 and a new medium twin model based on the 412. In the works is a lighter gross weight version of the ultra-large cabin 429 light twin, as well as a single-engine version. All will incorporate technology that will provide more efficient, productive and affordable helicopters.

Enstrom sold another of its 480B turbine singles to Plaquemines Parish (LA) Sheriff's Office, boosting expectations of further police sales of the \$889,500 model.

Schweizer Aircraft, owned by Sikorsky, took 13 orders for their 333 model and, combined with their new 434 model (which has more power and a four-bladed rotor), the company reported selling 28 aircraft last year.

AgustaWestland estimates that their new AW139 production facility in Philadelphia will assemble 30 aircraft per year. That plant will also provide completion and customization of the AW109.

MD Helicopters, Inc. announced a new, comprehensive support plan that covers parts for overhaul and scheduled and non-scheduled events on its helicopters. The "MD Power" plan covers all new and used MD aircraft, further protecting an owner's investment for as long as they operate the aircraft. MD Power was warmly embraced by the market place with several new customers signing on at Heli-Expo.

After the showroom floor closed, hundreds gathered for the "Salute to Excellence" Awards Banquet Monday night. The highlight of the banquet was a video paying tributes to award winners, recognizing their outstanding contributions to the international helicopter industry. A video celebrating HAI's 60th anniversary was shown.

ALEA's President Dan Schwarzbach was the recipient of the 2008 MD Helicopters Law Enforcement Award. During Schwarzbach's tenure, ALEA began the "Safety First" Program and ensured that ALEA serve as a member of the International Helicopter Safety Team (IHST). Schwarzbach re-invigorated the Airborne Law Enforcement Accreditation Commission, which will draft industry standards for the operation and administration of law enforcement aviation units in the U.S. It is believed that compliance with these standards will play a major role in the IHST's stated goal of reducing helicopter accidents by 80 percent in 10 years.

“As evidenced by the number of law enforcement aircraft and personnel at Heli-Expo 2008, the police aviation market continues to be robust. ALEA is looking forward to bringing our conference to this same locale in July and we expect a record turn out as HAI experienced," said Schwarzbach.

Heli-Expo 2008 came to a close in Houston on Tuesday, —breaking all attendance and exhibitor records. Next year's Heli-Expo is scheduled for February 22-24 in Anaheim, CA.