

# Wires – Got a Whole Heap Down

This time last year, *Vector* wrote about twin crusades to persuade farmers to remove their treacherous electric feeder wires, and disused telephone and television cables. As a result, potentially killer lines have been coming down around the country.

In December 2015, Parliament's Grand Hall was spellbound as Shannon Carr – daughter of helicopter pilot Peter Robb, who'd been killed in a wire strike in Whanganui in 2014 – spoke about her father's death, and pleaded for the farming community to respond meaningfully to the danger posed by aerial wires.

Shannon, now CEO of her father's company, Hill Country Helicopters, is one of 30 'ambassadors' of the NZ Agricultural Aviation Association's (NZAAA's) *Down to the Wire* campaign, launched in 2013.

"The ambassadors are sector leaders," says NZAAA Chair, Allan Beck, himself a wire-strike survivor, "who promote the aims of *Down to the Wire* in their local areas, coordinate its activities, and act as 'first responders' to farmers' queries."

CAA data shows that between 1979 and 2016, 38 people died, hundreds were injured, and aircraft worth many millions of dollars were destroyed in 69 accidents where an aircraft hit an unseen wire.

"Unseen wires present the greatest risk to agricultural aviation, particularly to spray pilots," says Allan.

"Lines can run across gullies, or be attached to obscure poles, or even trees. To make it worse, some manufacturers even produce green covered wire."

Allan says about 100 farmers have now been recognised with an NZAAA Certificate of Appreciation for tying their wires to an

existing fence, making sure those wires don't extend above that fence, or for removing their unused wires completely.

Allan says *Down to the Wire*, which is dedicated to the memory of Peter Robb, is getting some international attention.

"Our Facebook page has received interest from as far away as Switzerland, Austria, and the United States. The campaign has been covered by both American and Australian aviation magazines. All these places have wire-strike issues as well."

The Australian entrepreneur, Dick Smith – himself a keen aviator – is one of the campaign's five patrons. Allan Beck says his involvement will help the campaign receive more global attention.

Peter Robb's death triggered a second wire safety drive in 2014, *Let's Get 'Em Down*, spearheaded by his friend, farmer, and fellow helicopter pilot, Dean Lithgow.

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In 2002, a wire marking trial was begun across the Hutt River in the Hutt Valley. Red, yellow, and white balls of varying sizes were installed on the span.

Dean is also a wire-strike survivor.

As the two campaigns gather momentum, the aims of each have been the subject of numerous articles in local farming publications and national media.

Dean – who estimates the campaigns have brought down about 50 wires on central North Island farms – says the self-funded *Let's Get 'Em Down* has tried to saturate as many areas as possible with information.

"We estimate our advertisements have appeared about two million times in farming media. We've created *Keep us safe on your place* highway billboards, and that slogan has been printed on 600 chiller bags, being distributed from Aerowork bases to farmers throughout New Zealand.

"The same signage is on the back of stock trucks, acting as travelling billboards."

There's also a YouTube video *Let's Get 'Em Down*, produced by Dean's teenage sons, Casey and Stafford.

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CAA's Manager of Safety Investigation, Jim Burtenshaw, is coordinating the regulator's response to wire-safety issues.

"It's not just farm wires that are the issue," he says. "Of the 116 wire-strike accidents since 1979, 54 have been with power or phone cables."

Jim believes the success of the two campaigns is due to the fact they're industry-led.

"People from inside both the farming and helicopter sector trying to improve safety, means other people in those sectors are more willing to support them, and more willing to commit, in concrete terms, to the aims of their campaigns.

"The passion of the people leading the campaigns is also a factor. Others are inspired by that."

Jim believes the new Health and Safety in the Workplace Act 2015 has brought a greater awareness of each person's responsibilities.

"Those responsibilities are better defined. For instance, a farmer obviously has obligations to keep the pilot safe, but so too does the operator and the pilot themselves.

"People have a clearer idea of that, and I think everyone is aware of the stronger penalties for failure."

Although Jim is gratified by the success of both *Down to the Wire* and *Let's Get 'Em Down*, he says the problem is complex because of all the different participants involved (ie, farmers, pilots, operators, power distribution companies, landowners) and it will be "a long game".

"The CAA's aim is to reduce wire-strike accidents to zero," he says.

"Education (of pilots) will *reduce* the number of accidents. If your aim is to *eliminate* them, you have to get the wires down. That's the only way.

"Human error will always be with us, and people flying aircraft will continue to have accidents when there are wires in the skies.

"With many past accidents, the pilots *knew* the wires were there, at the time of the accident, but they were so loaded up with tasks they just forgot. It simply wasn't at the front of their brain – wire, wire, wire – because they were busy operating an aircraft and maybe also carrying out a spray operation."

Allan Beck says that because it has the official backing of the CAA and Federated Farmers, that it is now a national programme, and industry-led, *Down to the Wire* will continue to flourish, as new, younger, equally enthusiastic people take up the reins.

"Because they know the value in removing the danger," he says.

Dean Lithgow says the success of his campaign is very satisfying.

"It's really just myself and my family, doing this. We're not a large organisation or corporate.

"We just want to make a difference to safety in two industries we are involved in and passionate about." ■



*Down to the Wire* ambassadors in Parliament's Grand Hall, from left: Jim Burtenshaw, Bruce Peterson, John Funnell, Jim Guerin, John Sinclair, Andrew Hogarth, Tony Michelle, Sue O'Dowd, Allan Beck, Lloyd Matheson, Shannon Carr, Davin Mudford, Paul O'Dowd.

Photo: Stacey O'Dowd.