

Marijuana surveillance helicopter suffers engine failure, damaged in forced landing

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LAKE COUNTY – A helicopter used by local officials for aerial surveillance of illegal marijuana gardens was damaged in a forced landing last week after it had an engine failure during a training flight.

Capt. James Bauman of the Lake County Sheriff's Office reported Tuesday that no one was injured when the helicopter landed in an open meadow on Cow Mountain – about seven miles northwest of Lakeport – at about 3 p.m. June 25.

The Robinson R-44, owned by Cutting Edge Helicopters out of Sacramento, is used in ongoing aerial surveillance of illegal marijuana grows. Bauman said the helicopter was “substantially damaged” in the landing.

The helicopter crew – including Lt. Dave Garzoli of the sheriff’s Major Crimes Unit, who was undergoing flight instruction, and a company pilot who also is a certified flight instructor – had spent the morning conducting aerial surveillance over Lake County and were returning to Lakeport on a training flight after refueling in Ukiah, Bauman said.

During the training flight, the crew was simulating an emergency 180-degree autorotation and power recovery procedure at an altitude of about 500 feet over Cow Mountain when Bauman said they experienced an engine failure.

When attempts to recover engine power failed, the crew committed to a forced landing and, due to the lack of RPMs, the main rotor blades impacted the helicopter’s tail boom as the craft touched the ground, which Bauman said caused the damage.

Bauman said there was no property damage other than to the helicopter. The cause of the engine failure is being investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board and Cutting Edge Helicopters.

In April the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved an agreement with Cutting Edge Helicopters to rent its equipment for marijuana surveillance activities.

In the agreement, Cutting Edge receives \$490 an hour, according to minutes from the April 14 Board of Supervisors meeting.

At that time the board also approved helicopter lease agreements with PJ Helicopters and A&P Helicopters for rates of \$700 and \$750, respectively, as Lake County News has reported.