



Becker Helicopter Services Pty Ltd

**An open letter from Mike Becker regarding Helicopter Operations on the Sunshine Coast
– Embargoed until 10:00am, 7 February 2014 -**

Becker Helicopters is a great local business and a good corporate citizen

Becker Helicopters has been operating helicopters on the Sunshine Coast since 1995. Originally called Noosa Helicopters and based at the old Noosa Aerodrome we now operate 18 Helicopters employ over 70 fulltime staff and 30 contractors from our main facility at the Sunshine Coast Aerodrome.

Accommodating over 100 students per year from Australia, NZ, Asia, USA, Europe and the Middle East, we train up to a Diploma in Aviation level which includes day, night, instrument and night vision goggles.

Becker Helicopters won the Telstra National Medium Business Award in 2013, numerous Export Awards as well as Mike Becker, the Chief Pilot, being awarded a Safety Award by the Air Pilots Guild out of London.

Becker Helicopters last year donated over \$100,000 into the Community and charity organisations in money, flights, speaking engagements, and we sponsor many many local events. We receive 1000's of requests for community support every year.

Becker Helicopters has offered its helicopters for (and they have been used for) emergency natural disaster response, bushfire control, and search and rescue. Having mobilised our fleet during the Grantham, Bundaberg and central Queensland emergencies, we flew emergency rescue missions of medicine, food, stock, and lifted people from rooves, and have done such humanitarian missions every year for over 18 years.

For the past 18 years Becker Helicopters has taken young people as Apprentices, school based work experience and many other community endeavours. This company believes that it must find jobs for our young people; this is about building a community with industry and a future for the next generation. If this community has no industry and no jobs there will be a silent welfare state.

Where we train and our efforts to do this with the urban community in mind

For the past 18 years Becker Helicopters has operated at local Airports including Toowoomba, Oakey, Kingaroy, Gympie, Kilcoy, Watts Bridge, Redcliffe, Coolangatta, Archerfield, Goondiwindi, Wondai, Nanango, Maryborough, Hervey Bay, Bundaberg, Teewah, Sunshine Coast, Tin Can Bay, Rainbow Beach, and if required at times Brisbane International and of course Caloundra. Becker Helicopters also leases 1000s of acres of cane land for designated private landing pads, to assist in noise reduction for circuit training.

We have a commercial activity arrangement with the State Government where we pay to be able to utilise State Forest areas with over 23 designated helicopter landing sites. We are the only helicopter company on the Sunshine Coast that has been proactive and sought solutions and put our money where our mouth is and actually pay for these additional areas. The State and Council have been very supportive of these efforts.

In 2008 we signed our first large training contract using larger turbine helicopters (Bell 206 Jet Rangers) and

completed a presentation at a full Council meeting with the Sunshine Coast Council to disclose how much export business we were bringing in to the Coast and the ramifications of that business. At that meeting it was decided for us to continue to use the Teewah Landing ground to help minimise any long term noise affects, which we have been doing successfully since 1995. As, I might add, have all other fixed wing and helicopter operators.

In 2010 we started to make approaches to Council in order to purchase private property including a farm to help reduce the use of Teewah and to continue to go unnoticed at other local aerodromes, including Caloundra.

The changing political environment in recent years

Unfortunately at that time the Noosa de-amalgamation process began and helicopters, particularly those used at Teewah became a political football. This was instigated by Michael Glouster (a strategist for the Noosa Parks Association) and Mr Scholfield (a local resident in Tewantin) and driven by Russell Green, and Tony Wellington as current councillors and used by Noel Playford in his mayoral campaign in order to secure votes.

This ultimately meant that any proposal we put up to move operations was never effectively addressed or answered. We were, in effect, left with nowhere to go and no option was ever discussed. Helicopters do not fit into any planning scheme, we are not like fixed wing aircraft, we are a business that most do not understand or know how to manage. We have always had to work on the fringe.

Another factor that has not helped our operations is the building and development we have seen on the Sunshine Coast since our arrival in 1995. Most concerning is the development of residential buildings under flight paths and in the vicinity of operating aerodromes. Although these development applications (particularly the ones at Bellavista) were initially rejected by Council (because they could see the future conflict between an industry requiring an aerodrome and the new residents below) their decision was overruled. We are now experiencing the ramifications of this decision.

The current situation

If we now flash forward to 2013/2014. The new Noosa Council has been formed and the first two items of business of the new Council was to instigate kerb side rubbish pickup and have any commercial helicopter operations banned from the Teewah landing ground. There was no consultation and no communication with us. The new councillors made a political decision based on their own agendas.

Because any other proposals we had put forth were no longer available (commercial realities overtook council timeframes) we had no option but to start using those aerodromes we had made an attempt not to be at in the past. This included Caloundra, Caboolture, Gympie and Kilcoy.

Contrary to the belief of some here, we had no intention of deliberately going into an area to make noise BUT we decided to use aerodromes we were legally able to use and yes we knew this would have an impact, an impact that we hoped would spark some debate and get the wheels moving for us to have some of the areas we had suggested to be looked at yet again. We needed decisions to be made, not just for us but for the people we were affecting. I think this is now starting to progress as I have had a successful meeting with Council recently and we have some options on the table again.

For the last 18 years that we have been operating on the Sunshine Coast we have done very well to stay out of sight out of mind. There are only a very small number within the whole population that are affected by aircraft noise and 90% of these people are either located in the near vicinity of an aerodrome or are under the flight path of a route to and from that aerodrome to another one. They should have bought there knowing the ramifications of buying close to a runway, if they did not know the ramifications then they were either poorly educated or ill-informed and perhaps should be talking to the developer or real estate agent that sold them that land, as we cannot control what developments happen underneath our approved operating space.

We want solutions

Becker Helicopters would like to see all parties concerned reach agreement on a short term solution (now), a medium term solution (next 6-12 weeks with a shelf life of 10 years) and a long term solution (a 20 year plan).

1. Short term:

- a. Becker Helicopters will where possible not be conducting touch and go circuits at Caloundra on a Sunday.
- b. This was made effective from January 19th.
- c. Our flight logs show that we have only ever sent up to 2 helicopters to Caloundra at a time out of a fleet of 17. Never have we sent any more
- d. We do not control other operators or private owners who may elect to fly otherwise

2. Medium term:

- a. Becker Helicopters has again suggested to Council, the grass airstrip at Bells Pocket would be a good option. This is an old, disused grass strip owned by Stocklands and is encompassed in a current lease to a local farmer.
- b. I understand Council may be willing to sublease this area for helicopters to use. Stocklands simply needs to agree to this.

3. Long term:

- a. Local Council needs to consider the local helicopter industry in its aviation plans for the Sunshine Coast.
- b. The State Government needs to identify another area to construct a new aerodrome where aviation Companies are no longer encroached upon by residential development. The Johnston Road site comes to mind.

What next?

Again, Becker Helicopters is putting forward solutions. I look forward with interest to see where the local community are willing to compromise, what Council is able to offer in support, and a plan the State Government is willing to propose. It will be great to discuss these issues but most importantly I would like to see implementation plans for any agreements.

In conclusion I would ask that the local Council and the State Minister disclose to this meeting the number of complaints they have had against helicopters by identifiable individuals as opposed to the number of support calls they have had. I think everyone would be very surprised to know the actual numbers.

I know for every person that calls me to complain I get almost two in support.

I wish you all the best for the "Public Forum" and express the intention that we want to be part of the solution. I trust you will all look for solutions and hopefully there are some good ideas to come forward.

Mike Becker
Chief Pilot
Becker Helicopters
6 February 2014