

Jerry Hagstrom



Ag pilots navigate EPA, FAA

PALM SPRINGS, Calif.—When International Rice Festival Queen Isabella Hardy spoke at the USARice Outlook Conference near here last week, she promised to spend the next year going to college and promoting rice, but she made it clear she will make time for the flying lessons that will lead to her chosen career as an agricultural aviator.

On a USARice podcast, Hardy, a daughter of a Louisiana rice family, explained she was drawn to a career dropping seed, fertilizer, and pesticides from planes because “I knew I didn’t want to sit down in an office every day and do the same work. I wanted to do something new every day and stay on my feet.” As a pilot, Hardy said, “I have to pay attention every day or else I am going to crash [or] not going to spray the right field. It’s going to keep my mind sharp.”

It would be understandable if Hardy didn’t want to go anywhere near agricultural aviation. This year has seen 55 agricultural-aviation accidents, including 11 that were fatal, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The industry also faces constant negotiations with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Aviation Administration, and state agencies.

But Hardy has plenty of company. Ag aviators experience “an incredible feeling of freedom” and beauty because they can see out of the cockpit and even out of the top of the planes, said Andrew Moore, the executive director of the National Agricultural Aviation Association (NAAA), which held its Ag Aviation Expo in Palm Springs the same week. “Deep down, the members are proud of what they do, helping produce food, fiber, bio-fuel in healthy, affordable amounts that could not be done without crop-protection products,” he added.

Most people don’t realize ag aviators treat forests and sometimes fight forest fires, Moore said. The accident rate for agricultural aviation is the same as the broader aviation industry and the rate has been decreasing, he pointed out.

Robert Ching, a young Michigan pilot who was attended the expo with his wife, My, and 5-week-old son Charlie, said he had started his own agricultural-aviation business to combine a love of flying from childhood and his experience working on his uncle’s farm from the age of 14.

Ching’s operation is an example of the latest innovations in ag aviation. His company uses drones (called “uncrewed aircraft”) for the corners of fields that planes can’t reach safely. My Ching manages the drone part of the business. Ching has also developed an app for an iPhone or iPad that pilots use to assess spray patterns to make them more efficient.

People in other sectors of agriculture often describe ag-aviation pilots as the thrill seekers of agriculture, but Ching said ag aviators are “average, normal people.”

“I don’t think many people in the industry are adrenaline junkies,” he said. “Most of the people are very professional.”

Safety is, however, the No. 1 concern of ag aviators. At the expo, there was a daylong course on how to avoid wires, the greatest danger to ag aviators, while public policy was relegated to a single morning. At an awards dinner, every honoree ended the acceptance speech by saying, “Fly safe.”

The EPA now requires continuing education for commercial pesticide applicators, but Moore said NAAA was providing that training years before the EPA requirement. Under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, EPA also determines how a pesticide can be applied safely. NAAA works constantly to keep the EPA informed about the latest aviation technologies to control how pesticides “move in the air,” Moore said. He noted that EPA is under a lot of pressure from non-governmental organizations to keep pesticides off the market, but he said the relationship with the agency is generally cordial.

Ag aviators have a harder time with the FAA, which has been working since 2016 to develop a public database of meteorological towers that ag aviators could use to avoid them, but has not finished it. The FAA is “an overworked agency,” Moore said.

The NAAA also hopes the farm bill will include more money for research at the Agricultural Research Service Aerial Application Technology Unit in College Station, Texas, and other institutions, as well as provisions to get rid of some duplicative regulations.

Ag aviators sometimes have conflicts with neighbors who don’t like planes flying low near them and their pets and try to convince local authorities to ban the planes and pesticides. The NAAA believes regulation should be science-based at the federal and state levels, not operated at the local level “based on emotions,” Moore said.

Mark Frey, an agricultural helicopter pilot from East Troy, Wisconsin, said people need to understand that calling in an ag aviator to treat a weedy field is like calling a doctor when you’re sick. □



Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at www.HagstromReport.com.