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Night Vision Goggles Help Pilots See

By Suzanne Jacobson

Payson, Arizona

When night falls on life-saving medical missions in Payson, pilots with Native Air helicopters will now slip on night vision goggles to help them see.

The helmet-mounted goggles amplify light 30,000 to 50,000 times.

“In certain instances in the past, we have had to decline missions into dark areas when there was no moon,” said Bill Irland, regional aviation manager at the Mesa-based Native Air.

Pilots need to see the horizon for safe flying.

“There are parts of northern Gila County where this is sometimes not possible,” Irland added. Payson’s helicopter became fully equipped July 20.

Sixty percent of the time, the Native Air helicopter flies from hospital to hospital. The remaining times, however, the helicopter may have to dip onto a remote highway, for instance, to evacuate a patient.

Native Air has dedicated a helicopter to Payson since 2002. They fly daily, although the exact number of flights was unavailable due to confidentiality reasons.

The cost to outfit a helicopter and crew with night vision equipment runs \$100,000 per base. Involved costs include equipment for the one pilot, nurse and a paramedic staff member each flight, and adding special lighting to the aircraft.

Historically, the military has had first dibs on technology like night vision goggles, and even engines, said Native Air President Anthony DiNota.

“They get first choice,” he added. “That’s OK. We all get that. It just makes things tight for us.”

Recently, for unknown reasons, the technology has become more available, DiNota said.

Night vision goggles allow pilots and crews to see light invisible to the human eye. The equipment makes hazards and accident scenes and obstructions like mountains more easily identifiable, according to Native Air.

The company operates 13 helicopter and three airplane bases in the state, seven of which use night vision technology. The company will outfit the remainder by mid-2010.