The Dangers of Mixed Traffic: FAA Targets Risks at Key Airports

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Key Points

- **Hotspot focus: The FAA is targeting KDCA, KLAS, LA area, and Gulf Coast airports due to helicopter/fixed-wing traffic risks.**
- **Immediate changes: KDCA closed one heli route; KLAS saw 30% drop in proximity events after ATC changes.**
- **More to come: The FAA is using AI and forming new rules; safety report due by Sept 2025.**

April 22 was an important day for the safety of aircraft operating at major airports across the US.

The FAA held a Safety Roundtable to discuss how to best manage risks associated with intensive helicopter operations near fixed wing traffic in busy, controlled airspace.

This follows the tragic mid-air collision of a Black Hawk helicopter and CRJ700 airliner at **KDCA/Washington** on January 29.

The Table featured a collective of FAA leadership, ATC representatives, helicopter operators and industry safety experts.

Their purpose was to identify the specific hazards of mixed helicopter and fixed-wing operations –

especially in congested airspace – and how to better protect us from them.

While the FAA has yet to release a comprehensive public report, they have been providing updates and preliminary findings via their online newsroom.

Here's what's being discussed.

The Targets

The Round Table's approach to the dangers of mixed traffic identified three core issues:

- **Airspace –** better strategies to segregate helicopter and fixed wing traffic are sorely needed, especially at congested and controlled airports.
- **Communication** – communication protocols between pilots and ATC needs to be improved.
- **AI –** using AI technology to learn from existing data (such as incident and accident reports) and identify patterns of risk. It then becomes easier to effectively mitigate these dangers quickly, and with limited resources.

Hot Spots

The Group went on to identify the US airports of primary concern…

Washington

The swiftest action took place at KDCA/Washington itself in the aftermath of the Potomac disaster. The airport is situated in close proximity to the locally known *helicopter alley* – an area of dense rotorcraft traffic used by essential services such as the military, law enforcement and medevac.

In response to the accident, the FAA closed the low-level helicopter route in use at the time and has **restricted non-essential helicopter ops.** Only those engaged in 'special missions' will be allowed. ADS-B Out has also been mandated for all but the most secure of flights.



The FAA has permanently closed helicopter Route 4 since the accident in January.

Las Vegas

The Safety Round Table identified **KLAS/Las Vegas** next as perhaps the airport of highest safety concern for mixed traffic, where air tours are frequent.

Concern was raised by the group that helicopter routes used in agreements with local operators lacked effective guidance on vertical and lateral boundaries. And in many cases, tower controllers were **not issuing traffic advisories** to arriving and departing fixed wing traffic.

In what seems to be a case of procedural ‘slip’, normalization of deviance or even perhaps complacency the FAA has reported **routine lack of compliance with Class B separation rules.**

Either way, it is a potentially dangerous mix.

Immediate changes have been put in place – essentially more proactive separation by ATC and better traffic info for pilots. We’re pleased to report that according to the FAA, these efforts reduced ‘proximity events’ by 30% in just three weeks – circumstances that FAA believe might elevate collision risk (even if legal separation has been applied).

Other changes are coming in Las Vegas, but these have yet to be announced.



The FAA has identified KLAS/Las Vegas as being at high risk from mixed traffic.

Los Angeles

LA’s airports are another area of concern – **KBUR/Burbank** and **KVNY/Van Nuys** were specifically mentioned. Here airspace is complex, and hosts substantial helicopter ops including news, medical and air tours close to commercial flight paths.

The FAA is actively looking at operations near these airports but as yet, there are no major changes to report.

The Gulf Coast

The FAA has begun looking at busy airports along the US Gulf Coast which include **offshore helicopter operations.**

It is not going to be an easy fix, but they advise that AI technology mentioned above will be put to good use to figure out where the greatest risks lie and what can be done about them in the near future.

The FAA has identified Gulf Coast airports as another hot spot for fixed and rotary wing mixed traffic.

Better Rules

In response to these dangers among others, the FAA has also launched another safety initiative – they've formed a rule making committee to improve the safety of commercial helicopter tours.

Some elements of this group's focus will have an important impact on the safety of mixed traffic operations – including potential changes to regulations.

There will also be a renewed focus flight data to ensure helicopters do not stray from established operating areas and other measures to **better separate them from fixed wing traffic in busy airspace** (including further ADS mandates).

A report of their safety recommendations is due by 22 September 2025.

Have Something to Add?

Please get in touch with us! You can reach the team via news@ops.group