

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Assemblywoman wants to make meteorological towers more visible after fatal Delta crash

By Roman Gokhman
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 05/04/2011 09:13:46 PM PDT

Motivated by the "avoidable death" of an agricultural pilot on a remote Delta island in Contra Costa County, a state legislator has introduced a bill requiring that meteorological towers 50 feet and taller be clearly marked and lit.

"This is a tragedy," said Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, D-Davis. "I felt it was a problem that needed to be addressed."

Stephen Allen, 58, was killed Jan. 10 when his airplane struck an unmarked, 198-foot-tall meteorological tower while he was seeding a field on Webb Tract Island.

He likely never saw the steel tower, according to a preliminary report from the National Transportation Safety Board.

Allen's daughter Angela Lucero said this week her father had piloted airplanes since he was in high school and had 30 years of experience flying agricultural airplanes.

"It's very clear it's a dangerous job, but he was very good at it," she said. "He was a very capable pilot."

Meteorological towers are designed to evaluate the potential of wind turbines. The Federal Aviation Administration requires that all towers 200 feet and taller be marked with bright paint and a light. The nearly invisible guy wires that hold them up require colorful sleeves.

But towers shorter than 200 feet fall under the purview of local governments, which often do not require them to be marked or lit.

If passed into law, AB511 would change the state's

public utilities code and require that all meteorological

towers in California from 50 to 200 feet tall be marked with alternating bands of orange and white paint, a red flashing light at the tower's highest point, two marker balls attached to each guy wire, and a clear marking on the ground where the guy wires are anchored, including sleeves at each anchor point.

The bill would make it a crime to violate these regulations.

The measure cleared the Assembly's Business, Professions and Consumer Protection Committee on April 26 and must also pass the Assembly Appropriations Committee and the full Assembly before moving on to the state Senate and the governor's office for passage.

Yamada had not met Allen's widow or two daughters before last week. The crash took place outside her district, and Allen's widow and daughters are not her constituents. Yamada serves on the state Assembly Agriculture Committee, however.

"Agriculture is not just a District 8 issue, it's a California issue," she said. "These towers are nearly invisible. I think California can join Wyoming and South Dakota that have similar requirements."

Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan, D-Alamo, whose district includes Webb Tract, said she wholeheartedly supports Yamada's bill.

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in more safety for people who work in the In Contra Costa County, the zoning administrator oversees the approval of meteorological towers and requires only land-use permits before approval. The county is reviewing its policy because of Bay Area News Group's coverage of Allen's death.

Aruna Bhat, the deputy director of the Community Development Division of the Department of Conservation and Development, said Contra Costa planners have called a handful of counties and found two, Yolo and Riverside, that have their own meteorological tower-permitting rules.

"The majority of jurisdictions don't have any special processes on these towers," she said. "We just got all of these results and are still evaluating. We haven't really decided what to do yet."

Bhat said her department will also contact the NTSB, FAA, the county Agricultural Advisory Task Force and the California Agricultural Aircraft Association, which licenses agricultural pilots in the state.

The FAA is also reviewing its recommendations to builders of meteorological towers shorter than 200 feet.

The agency is expected to decide on possible changes this summer, spokesman Ian Gregor said. Whatever changes the agency makes will be recommendations and not requirements.

Lucero testified before the Assembly committee that approved the bill last week.

"I think it's very dangerous to do business at the possible cost of people's lives," she said.