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Valley stations keep copters on ground

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The Arizona Republic

Jul. 31, 2007 12:00 AM

The skies above Valley commuters Monday were quieter than usual.

The five major television outlets chose not to put helicopters in the air to cover traffic or news events during the morning and evening rush hours, three days after the midair collision that killed four local TV staffers covering a police chase.

Channel 3 (KTVK) and Channel 15 (KNXV), which each lost a pilot and a cameraman in Friday's crash over Steele Indian School Park in central Phoenix, did not use helicopters Monday to cover commuter traffic or news.

Channel 12 (KPNX) had a helicopter ready to go if any events had warranted coverage, according to Mark Casey, the station's news director. Other stations did not return phone calls Monday.

Instead of copters, most local television stations used state-operated freeway

cameras to show traffic and weather on Monday.

The absence of the helicopters came as some critics questioned the need and the value of airborne coverage of events such as police chases.

"The pilots have been doing a relatively good job in a very difficult job to do. But with this (Phoenix) accident, it was really just a matter of time before it happened," said Justin Green, a helicopter pilot and attorney with the aviation law firm Kreindler & Kreindler in New York City.

Green said his firm handles more aviation cases than any other in the nation.

"When you have five, six or seven helicopters rapidly converging on the same location to film the same thing, at that point, you have a balance between safety and getting the right shot, and I think in this circumstance . . . that safety loses out."

Green said he is concerned that some stations require pilots to fly and report on events simultaneously. He advocates having pilots concentrate solely on flying, with at least one other person onboard for reporting or filming.

Stations that operate the helicopters said they are a necessary newsgathering tool in any large metropolitan area.

"Helicopters are an effective way to cover the news in a way that gives viewers, live or taped, almost firsthand experiences with news events," said John Misner, president and general manager of Channel 12.

"It's an effective way to cover a lot of ground quickly and get our crews over the scene of a breaking-news event."

Channel 15 reporter Steve Filmer said Friday that helicopters help warn local residents if a police chase is headed their way or if a dangerous incident is occurring nearby.

"What we do as . . . live reporters has value in that we show (residents) what is going on," Filmer said. "It's a very difficult and dangerous job."

Channel 3's Mike Watkiss agreed Friday: "We get up in the air . . . so people can get their kids off the streets."

On Monday, a TV news helicopter lost power and made a crash landing southwest of Dallas; none of the three people aboard was seriously injured.

On the radio side, the traffic helicopter operated by KTAR (92.3 FM) was over Valley freeways as usual on Monday. However, another major Valley news-radio station abandoned helicopter reporting on traffic in 2001.

KFYI (550 AM) has gone to a system using the state's freeway cameras and traffic sensors, as well as vehicles driven by a private company.

"It enables us to be everywhere," said Smokey Rivers, director of operations for KFYI and Clear Channel Phoenix.

"If you are airborne, you are overseeing a trouble spot. . . . We feel we have a more comprehensive system."