

Probe eyes icy doom

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Investigators are looking at ice buildup on a Manhattan investment banker's plane as a possible cause of the three-mile death dive that wiped out his family and killed a colleague, authorities said yesterday.

Jeffrey Buckalew, his wife, Corinne, their children, Meriwether and Jackson, and a fellow banker, Rakesh Chawla, perished when the plane crashed onto a New Jersey highway.

"Buckalew was in icing conditions," said National Transportation Safety Board investigator Ralph Hicks. "How much ice was on the plane, we don't know, and we may never know."

Even a little ice can crash a plane — and pilots reported plenty of it Tuesday morning at around 17,000 feet, the altitude at which Buckalew's plane began to plunge. One airline pilot radioed that he'd picked up an inch of ice.

Buckalew's plane smashed nose-first into I-287 in Harding Township, just south of Morristown.

"The aircraft was very fragmented. We haven't even verified that we have all of the plane," Hicks reported.

Experts say ice could have piled up so fast and thick that Buckalew didn't realize the peril facing his Socata TBM 700, a single-engine turboprop able to fly as high as passenger jets.

"It can absolutely happen in the blink of an eye. It's extraordinary," said Brian Alexander, a pilot and a lawyer with the aviation-oriented firm Kreindler & Kreindler.

Moments before disaster struck, an air controller warned Buckalew that he was flying into ice.

"If we can go straight through it, it's no problem for us," Buckalew confidently replied.

Buckalew's plane was outfitted with anti-icing equipment, which typically would include rubber "boots" at the front edge of the wings that rapidly inflate to knock off ice. The plane also would have had electric heaters to clear ice from the windshield and propeller.

Witness reports that the plane broke up before it crashed might be explained by Buckalew's desperate effort to regain control.

"If he is trying to recover and he overstresses the airplane, you'd expect it to come apart," Alexander said.

NTSB investigators are just starting their work, and it will be months before they're done.

"We can't rule out anything . . . We are looking at the man, the machine and the environment," Hicks said.

Colleagues of Buckalew and Chawla at the Greenhill & Co. investment bank recalled the men at a memorial event yesterday as good friends. "Many employees openly expressed their feelings as well as fond memories," the company said in a statement.

The Buckalews split their time between an Upper East Side apartment and a farm in Charlottesville, Va., where their children attended the private St. Anne's-Belfield School.

The tragedy shocked a food-cart vendor near the Buckalews' home.

"I can't tell you how nice they were. Easygoing people," said Alberto De La Cruz, who yesterday showed off a necklace Meriwether made for him in preschool.

"They're in heaven."

Additional reporting by Daniel Gold and Don Petersen

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