



Above: Upgraded Customs Coastwatch Bell 412 helicopter during a mission.

New helicopters enter service

Customs \$1 billion plan to upgrade its aerial surveillance fleet has achieved another major milestone under the *Civil Maritime Surveillance 2004* program with the entry into service of two Customs Coastwatch helicopters for Border Protection Command (BPC) in the Torres Strait.

The new helicopter contract commenced on 1 July 2007 with two helicopters operated by certified aircrew which are supplied as part of a contract with Australian Helicopters Pty Ltd (AHPL). AHPL has a long history with Customs and has operated Coastwatch helicopter surveillance, logistic and response services in the Torres Strait since 1995. As a result of a highly competitive tender and selection process, AHPL won the new contract for helicopter services to

BPC. The new contract includes the delivery of a new helicopter, expanded electronic and communication capabilities, and a greater emphasis on Mission performance outcomes.

The Coastwatch helicopters will provide three key services:

- personnel and equipment transport and logistics support;
- carriage of response personnel to investigate suspected breaches of Australian law; and
- surveillance operations by day and night in the Torres Strait area.

The new helicopter, a Eurocopter AS350B3 Squirrel, replaces the old Bell Longranger IV



Above: Customs Coastwatch A5 350B3 Squirrel helicopter over Horn Island.

single engine helicopter and is capable of greater surveillance speeds, longer operating ranges and is equipped with updated communications equipment.

The second helicopter, the existing Bell 412 twin-engine helicopter, has also been upgraded with new surveillance and communications equipment to provide enhanced detection capabilities. The Bell 412 will also be tasked to provide search and rescue as well as medical evacuation services to the Torres Strait area.

Modification of the Bell 412 commenced in late 2006 with system upgrades introduced during regular maintenance schedules while

the Squirrel was delivered to AHPL in February 2007 and an extensive fit out was undertaken over a three-month period to meet Customs requirements.

Both aircraft will operate from Horn Island and will deliver services in the Torres Strait region. Aerial surveillance of Australia's northern borders will also be strengthened by a new contract for fixed-wing civil maritime surveillance and response services—provided by Surveillance Australia Pty Ltd (SAPL). SAPL already provides civil maritime surveillance and responses to Border Protection Command under current contracts which expire at the end of 2007.



The current fixed wing fleet operated by SAPL is comprised of a range of electronic and smaller visual surveillance-configured aircraft. The new contract replaces all the existing visual and hybrid configured aircraft with an all-electronic configured fleet of 10 modified Dash 8 aircraft. The fleet is comprised of:

- five Coastwatch Dash 8-202 already in service that are being upgraded throughout 2007 to ensure readiness for service;
- two additional Dash 8-202s that have seen service in passenger configurations that will undergo extensive modifications in Canada to meet the demands of their new role in the surveillance environment. These aircraft are then flown to Australia to undergo additional

surveillance modifications and will be in service in the new configuration in late 2007; and

- three larger Dash 8-315s, which have been recently built in Canada by manufacturer Bombardier. The aircraft were then modified by Field Aviation, an aircraft modification and engineering company also in Canada, to suit the surveillance role. The aircraft were then ferried from Canada to Australia for additional modifications necessary for Coastwatch service.

The Dash 8 series aircraft have a proven capability in maritime surveillance roles and can operate in all weather conditions. The Coastwatch aircraft will operate out of existing Coastwatch



Above: A Customs Coastwatch Dash 8 during pre-flight preparations.



Left: The cabin of a Customs Coastwatch Dash 8 during modification. The installation of approximately three kilometres of cabling is required in each aircraft to support the new surveillance configuration.

bases in Cairns, Thursday Island, Darwin and Broome and can be deployed to other areas around Australia as required.

All of the Coastwatch aircraft will be fitted with the latest generation maritime surveillance technology, including improved electro-optics, infrared sensors, radars and satellite communications. The improved sensors will allow detection of smaller targets at a greater range and result in increased total area coverage searched in a mission. Importantly, the contract allows for upgrading surveillance equipment to keep pace with the latest advances in technology over the life of the contract.

The program is integral to the activities of BPC in managing and coordinating the deployment of Customs and Defence assets. With support from the Torres Strait helicopter service and regular patrols by Customs and Navy patrol vessels, these aircraft will help to ensure that Australia's northern maritime zones are monitored and protected. The new contracts signal the Commonwealth Government's ongoing commitment to protecting Australia's borders from a range of threats including illegal foreign fishing, people smuggling and quarantine risks.

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