Pilot dies in Avoyelles plane crash

Wildlife and Fisheries plane crashes in field after hitting state police tower

By MARY BROUSSARD
Westside bureau

GOUDEAU - A state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries pilot died Thursday when his plane apparently hit a guy wire on a state police radio communications tower and crashed into a field in Avoyelles Parish, authorities said.

Preliminary investigation indicates that Gerald John Daigle, 54, of Denham Springs died when his twin-engine plane struck the ground about two miles north of the St. Landry-Avoyelles parish line, officials said.

Daigle's plane was en route from Baton Rouge to Bunkie to pick up wildlife and fisheries Commission member Donald Hines and take him to a commission public hearing near New Orleans, department spokesman Wade Byrd said.

Local residents say patchy fog may have contributed to the crash, which is being investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board, officials said.

The crash occurred about 8:20 a.m., near La. 361, state police spokesman Ron McGee said. He said the craft was flying below 500 feet when it clipped a support wire on the 500-foot steel communications tower and went into an uncontrolled crash. The craft landed about 300 yards from the tower.

Local and state officials cordoned off the crash site. Pieces of wreckage were scattered around the area.

SEE CRASH, 7A
CONTINUED FROM 1A

strewn throughout the field, and small sections of the plane still clung to the guy wires.

A woman told authorities that she heard a popping noise and then a loud thud as the plane crashed, McGee said. “One of the ladies said there was an engine popping,” McGee said. “I don’t know if he was in an emergency mode or not. I don’t know if he was descending to land.”

Witnesses told authorities that fog was dense in areas at the time of the crash.

“Some of the local residents say there was a low ceiling,” said Capt. Burton Wiley of the Wildlife and Fisheries Department. “There were several residents that said you couldn’t see the top of the tower.”

Ironically, the steel tower — part of a new state police communications system — was not yet in service, McGee said. The new tower, designed for communications on higher frequencies, was constructed four months ago, McGee said.

The tower did not appear to be heavily damaged but will be inspected, McGee said.

“The guy wires stretched,” McGee said. “They stretched like a rubber band from where I was. I couldn’t see any damage.”

Daigle’s body was extricated from the plane, officials said. The body was taken to Shreveport for an autopsy scheduled Thursday night, according to Dr. L.J. Mayeux, Avoyelles Parish assistant coroner.

Daigle chose for the department about five years ago, Byrd said. The craft was used for waterfowl surveys, enforcement and transportation of department officials, he said.

Byrd said the department — a small, close-knit group — considered the crash a great tragedy. Daigle, a retired military pilot, worked for the department for 10 years.

“We’re all saddened,” Byrd said. “Gerald was very widely known, a very happy individual. You don’t expect this to happen.”

The department will cooperate with the NTSB in an investigation of the crash, Byrd said.

“No one knows if it was engine problems or what,” Byrd said, adding that Daigle was in good health.

McGee said it was not immediately known why Daigle was flying low. The craft did not explode on impact, he said.

The two-day commission meeting is held annually to determine the opening date for the state’s spring brown-shrimp season. Daigle was to pick up Hines for the New Orleans area meeting, a courtesy the department extends to commissioners who may be unable to attend an important meeting because of their jobs or the distance to the meeting, Byrd said. Hines, who is the Avoyelles Parish School Board president, also is a physician.