

Black Hawk helicopters take to the border skies

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The UH-60 Black Hawk will replace older UH-1N Huey helicopters flown by pilots with U.S. Customs' Air and Marine Operations in support of border security operations in the El Paso region, which includes New Mexico. (Courtesy of CBP Air And Marine Operations)

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Black Hawk helicopters will begin flights over the stretch of border that includes New Mexico as U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations adds the military's "premier utility helicopter" to the El Paso-area fleet.

The Black Hawk can "get to a location faster, remain longer, and carry more people, systems, or cargo in all kinds of weather," according to a news release from CBP Air and Marine Operations.

The U.S. Army is transferring three Black Hawk helicopters to the El Paso Air Branch to replace older UH-1N Huey helicopters now being retired and sold.

“The increased capabilities of the Black Hawk will allow us to respond to the further reaches of our area of operation much quicker than we are able to with our UH-1N Hueys,” said Mitch King, El Paso Air Branch deputy director of air operations.

“The Black Hawk will allow us to support federal, state and local partners in the Boot Heel of New Mexico with much more reliability and speed than we are able to now,” King said in response to a question from the Journal about how the helicopters will be used in remote areas of New Mexico.

CBP uses helicopters for border enforcement, search and rescue operations and natural disaster response. Air and Marine Operations in El Paso has not flown a Black Hawk in the region since 2008. The El Paso Air Branch has the largest area of responsibility in the Southwestern region and encompasses part of West Texas and all of New Mexico and Oklahoma.

The “speed and range” of the Black Hawk are a “game changer” for the El Paso region in responding to law enforcement or medical emergencies, according to CBP Air and Marine Operations.

“I think that’s wonderful and will be very beneficial for Hidalgo County. Everything is on foot now or horseback, especially because we have a lot of mountainous terrain,” said Tisha Green, Hidalgo County manager.

The sparsely populated county is home to remote ranchland and 86 miles of border with Mexico. Animas business owner and rancher Trisha Elbrock welcomes the addition of the Black Hawk helicopters. “If it’s going to help and help our Border Patrol and make things safer down here, I have no problem with them,” Elbrock said.

She recalled seeing one of the distinctive sleek black helicopters about a decade ago on her ranch but did not know why it was on the border.

“It landed here south of my house. I think it was just a special deal. They don’t do it very often,” Elbrock said.

Hollywood movies have contributed to the high-profile reputation of the Black Hawk helicopter in military operations.

Although some New Mexicans in the rugged Boot Heel welcome the extra air support, other border residents are concerned about Black Hawks in the skies over the border.

“We’re allowing the militarization of a civilian enforcement force, which in this case is the Border Patrol. Border Patrol is not a military unit. It’s not an army,” said Fernando Garcia, executive director of the Border Network for Human Rights. The organization advocates for immigration reform and human rights in the El Paso and southern New Mexico region.

Garcia said the Trump administration has portrayed the border as a dangerous no man’s land in an effort to get more funding for border enforcement.

“They have been promoting a narrative that says the border is just a piece of land in the middle of the desert with nothing there but criminals ... not acknowledging there are millions of people living along the U.S. border, millions of U.S. citizens, and they are going to be impacted by this militarization,” Garcia said.

The El Paso- Las Cruces-Ciudad Juarez border region alone is home to more than 2.5 million people.

The Army uses the Black Hawk for moving troops and for conducting medical evacuations and air assault operations.

The helicopters assigned to the border will not be outfitted for fixed military-style gunnery but rather adapted for CBP's use, according to the El Paso Air Branch.

Air and Marine Operations pilots are training on the unit's first Black Hawk, which was delivered in November. The second helicopter is expected to arrive in the spring, and the third is scheduled for next year.