

# Massachusetts man convicted of illegal use of helicopter, false statements, attempted witness tampering

*Defendant previously participated in the theft of a helicopter from Norwood Memorial Airport.*

“An East Brookfield man was convicted today by a federal jury in Worcester in connection with unlawfully operating a helicopter, making false statements to federal investigators and attempting to tamper with a witness.

Antonio Santonastaso, 62, was convicted following a three-day jury trial of one count of serving as an airman without an airman certificate, one count of making false statements to federal agents and one count of attempted witness tampering. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy S. Hillman scheduled sentencing for Oct. 5, 2022. Santonastaso was indicted in May 2019.

“Mr. Santonastaso demonstrated a blatant disregard for FAA rules and regulations by operating a helicopter out of his backyard without a license on numerous occasions. Every time he did so, he endangered himself, his community and the general public on the ground,” said United States Attorney Rachael S. Rollins. “My office will continue our work to detect and hold accountable individuals who violate federal laws and regulations, as well as those who make false statements to federal investigators and who attempt to tamper with witnesses. I commend the Northeast U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of Inspector General, for their diligence and efforts in handling this case.”

“Anyone choosing to intentionally ignore Federal aviation

regulations and requirements will be pursued to the fullest extent of the law," said Joseph Harris, Special Agent-in-Charge, Department of Transportation Office of Inspector General, Northeastern Region. "As demonstrated by today's conviction, we will continue working with our law enforcement and prosecutorial partners to support the safety and integrity of the Nation's airspace."

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) revoked Santonastaso's license to pilot an aircraft in 2000, after he participated in the theft of a helicopter from Norwood Memorial Airport. Despite being aware of that revocation, Santonastaso operated a Robinson R-22 helicopter – taking off and landing from his backyard – more than 50 times between April 28, 2018, and Nov. 11, 2018.

When questioned by the FAA, Santonastaso made false statements regarding his eligibility to pilot the helicopter. Specifically, Santonastaso falsely claimed that the events that gave rise to the FAA's revocation of his license were a fabrication. Evidence at trial also established that Santonastaso attempted to corruptly persuade an individual with the intent to hinder, delay and prevent that individual from reporting his illegal helicopter flights to law enforcement.

The charging statutes provide for a sentence of no greater than 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and statutes which govern the determination of a sentence in a criminal case.

U.S. Attorney Rollins and DOT OIG SAC Harris made the announcement today. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Evan Panich of Rollins' Affirmative Civil Enforcement unit, cross-designated to the Criminal Division, and Danial Bennett of Rollins' Worcester Branch Office are prosecuting the case." -

Massachusetts Department of Justice.