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FAA to Investigate Sea Flight Engine Failure; Both of Company Planes Out of Operation with Engine Issues

Travel / **Published On January 24, 2020 04:17 AM /**

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Sea Flight departs St. Thomas in Jan. 2017 By. Sea Flight VI

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is investigating what caused a Sea Flight commuter plane's engine to fail minutes after takeoff from the Cyril E. King Airport on St. Thomas.

With six passengers aboard, Sea Flight #394SF made an emergency landing on the water around 9 a.m. Thursday, about two miles off the coast of St. Thomas, according to a text message alert broadcast by the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency.

No one aboard the St. Croix-bound flight was injured, according to VITEMA.

Phone and email messages left for VITEMA throughout the day went unanswered.

Donald Lewis, owner and president of Sea Flight, told the Consortium on Thursday that the engine of the Cessna 208 B failed just minutes into the flight. According to the FAA, Cessna 208B is a single-engine turbo-prop, in this instance outfitted with floats for water landings.

Mr. Lewis said that by late afternoon, the FAA had launched an automatic investigation into the incident. The plane's pilot was contacted by the Consortium but declined to comment because of the pending FAA investigation.

Sea Flight operates two aircraft between St. Thomas and St. Croix. One plane was previously out of service due to engine problems. Thursday's incident puts its second airplane out of operations, Mr. Lewis said.

Gov. Albert Bryan praised the pilot and first responders in a written statement on Thursday. "We are especially grateful for the heroic efforts of the pilot for safely landing the aircraft and for the swift response of our first responders, and that of the members of the St. Thomas boating community."

Sea Flight Had Issues with FAA

The Sea Flight commuter air service, and its corporate owner, City Wings Inc., has faced Federal Aviation Administration enforcement action in the past.

Mr. Lewis said he purchased City Wings Inc. from its previous owners in Puerto Rico in 2007. Four years later, in 2011, he registered the company to do business in the territory. During that time, the FAA twice suspended the company's flight certification. Also in the same period, the company's flight certification was terminated, according to FAA Quarterly Enforcement records.

The immediately available electronic records do not provide specifics about why City Wings (Sea Flight) certifications were suspended and/ or terminated. Mr. Lewis told the Consortium that he did not remember the details. He did recall that the FAA disputed the company's initial listing as a charter service, rather than a commuter airline.

Deadly 2001 Crash Involved Previous Sea Flight Owners

At 7:00 p.m. on May 13, 2001, a Cessna 404 aircraft operated by City Wings Inc. departed St. Croix en route to Aguadilla in Puerto Rico, with a stopover at the Luis Munoz Marin International Airport in San Juan.

The flight was operated by City Wings Inc. City Wings serviced the Virgin islands at the time, but was not owned by Mr. Lewis at the time.

FAA record show the St. Croix to Puerto Rico flight safely delivered passengers on its first leg to San Juan. But the commercial-rated pilot was later fatally injured when the plane struck a mountainside in the Caribbean National Forest.