



**Australian Government**

**Australian Transport Safety Bureau**

# **In-flight break-up involving Robinson R22 Beta, VH-ESG**

42 km south-east of Jericho, Queensland, on 20 April 2026

**ATSB Transport Safety Report**  
Aviation Occurrence Investigation  
AO-2026-073  
Preliminary – 11 June 2026

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**Postal address:** GPO Box 321, Canberra, ACT 2601  
**Office:** 12 Moore Street, Canberra, ACT 2601  
**Telephone:** 1800 020 616, from overseas +61 2 6257 2463  
Accident and incident notification: 1800 011 034 (24 hours)  
**Email:** [atsbinfo@atsb.gov.au](mailto:atsbinfo@atsb.gov.au)  
**Website:** [atsb.gov.au](http://atsb.gov.au)

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## **Acknowledgement of Country and Traditional Owners**

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# Preliminary report

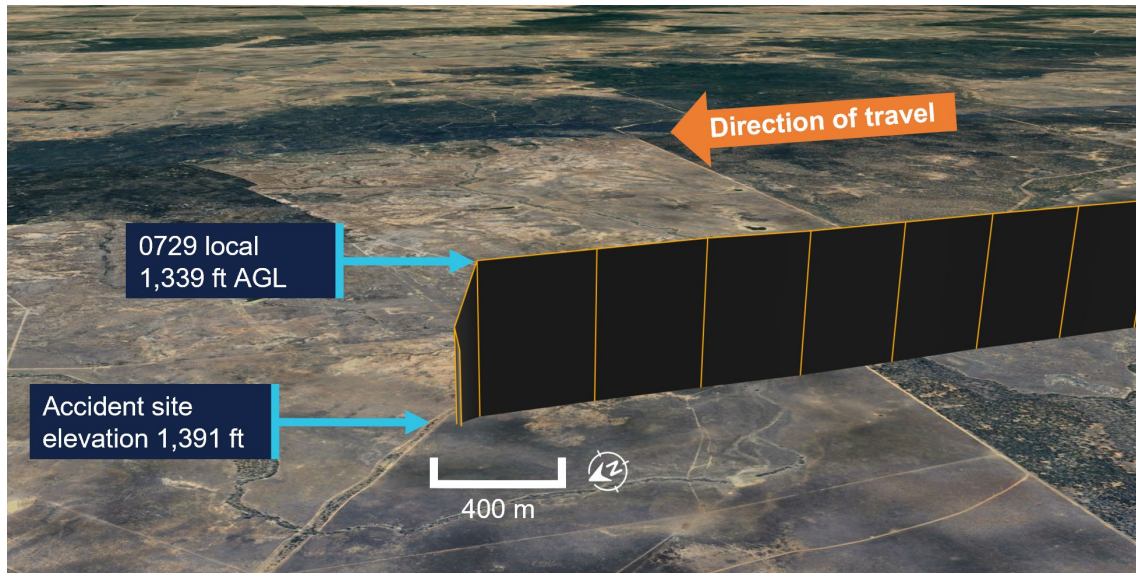
This preliminary report details factual information established in the investigation’s early evidence collection phase, and has been prepared to provide timely information to the industry and public. Preliminary reports contain no analysis or findings, which will be detailed in the investigation’s final report. The information contained in this preliminary report is released in accordance with section 25 of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003*.

## The occurrence

On the morning of 20 April 2026 at about 0643 local time, the pilot and sole occupant of a Robinson Helicopter Company R22 Beta, registered VH-ESG, took off from the operator’s helipad near Tambo, Queensland. The pilot’s destination was a property near Jericho (about 150 km from Tambo) to carry out mustering operations. The pilot reportedly intended to land at the property to plan the day’s work. After take-off the pilot flew north and generally maintained a height of about 2,400 ft above mean sea level (AMSL) during the flight which was between 900 ft and 1,400 ft above ground level (AGL) over undulating terrain.

Tracking data (see *Recorded data*) shows that the helicopter continued north and at 0729 was about 45 km from the destination when it entered a steep descent from about 1,339 ft AGL (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Flight path of VH-ESG and accident location**



Source: Google Earth, annotated by the ATSB

About 10 minutes later, one of the operator’s staff became concerned that there was no further tracking data for VH-ESG and contacted another of the operator’s pilots, who was mustering by helicopter on a different property, to advise them. The second pilot immediately ceased mustering operations, landed to refuel, then flew to the last known location of VH-ESG. Arriving at the location at about 0942, the second pilot commenced

a search and after a short time located the wreckage of VH-ESG. The second pilot landed. The pilot of VH-ESG had been fatally injured and the helicopter destroyed.

## Context

### Pilot information

The pilot held a Civil Aviation Safety Regulations 1998 Part 61 Commercial Pilot Licence (Helicopter), first issued in August 2016. The pilot was issued with a class 1 and 2 aviation medical certificate in January 2026, and at this time reported they had accrued about 5,600 flying hours.

### Helicopter information

VH-ESG was a Robinson R22 Beta powered by a 4-cylinder, horizontally opposed, Lycoming O-360-J2A engine, which was fan cooled. The helicopter was manufactured in 2007 and first registered in Australia on 19 May 2015. The helicopter had been registered to the operator since 20 January 2017.

The last periodic inspection was carried out in February 2026 and at that time the helicopter had accumulated 5,000.2 hours total time in service.

### Meteorological information

There were no official weather observations available near the accident location. The nearest official weather observations were obtained from Blackall Airport located 108 km to the south-west, with forecasts obtained for Emerald Airport, 193 km east-north-east, and Longreach Airport, 216 km west-north-west.

The aerodrome forecast (TAF)<sup>1</sup> for Emerald Airport issued at 0327 local included a TEMPO<sup>2</sup> for broken cloud at 1,300 ft above the airport (elevation 624 ft) between 0400 and 0800 local time with a south-east (120°) wind around 5 kt. The TAF issued at 0513 local for Longreach Airport indicated conditions were CAVOK<sup>3</sup> with a south-east (140°) wind around 9 kt.

The graphical area forecast (GAF)<sup>4</sup> issued at 0216 local for southern Queensland, and valid at the time of departure around 0643, indicated isolated fog until 0800 and areas of low cloud. The GAF also showed that conditions to the west of the helicopter's track were forecast to be clear. This was consistent with satellite imagery<sup>5</sup> which, according to Bureau of Meteorology analysis, showed the development of low-level cloud and fog signatures in the vicinity of the accident from approximately 0500.

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<sup>1</sup> TAF (aerodrome forecast): a statement of meteorological conditions expected for the specified period of time in the airspace within 5 NM (9 km) of the aerodrome reference point.

<sup>2</sup> TEMPO: A temporary deterioration in the forecast weather conditions, during which significant variation in prevailing conditions are expected to last for periods of between 30 and 60 minutes

<sup>3</sup> Ceiling and visibility okay (CAVOK): Visibility, cloud and present weather are better than prescribed conditions. For an aerodrome weather report, those conditions are visibility 10 km or more, no significant cloud below 5,000 ft, no cumulonimbus cloud, and no other significant weather.

<sup>4</sup> GAF (graphical area forecast): provides information on weather, cloud, visibility, icing, turbulence and freezing level in a graphical layout with supporting text.

<sup>5</sup> Himawari-9 Night Microphysics satellite imagery provided by the Bureau of Meteorology.

On the morning of the accident, other pilots flying from the operator’s base in Tambo reported a distinct inversion layer<sup>6</sup> at about 400 ft AGL. They reported the outside air temperature being cold below the inversion layer and warm and humid above it. There was no visible moisture. A further 100 ft above that, there was reportedly another distinct inversion layer where bushfire smoke could be smelt.

A person on the ground about 7 km from the accident site on a ridge line reported there were patchy clouds in the area and there was no rain or fog.

### Site and wreckage information

The accident site was located in flat, open farmland. Topographical data showed the accident site elevation was about 424 m above sea level (1,391 ft AMSL). The main wreckage included the cabin, engine, mast, and main rotor assembly (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: VH-ESG main wreckage**



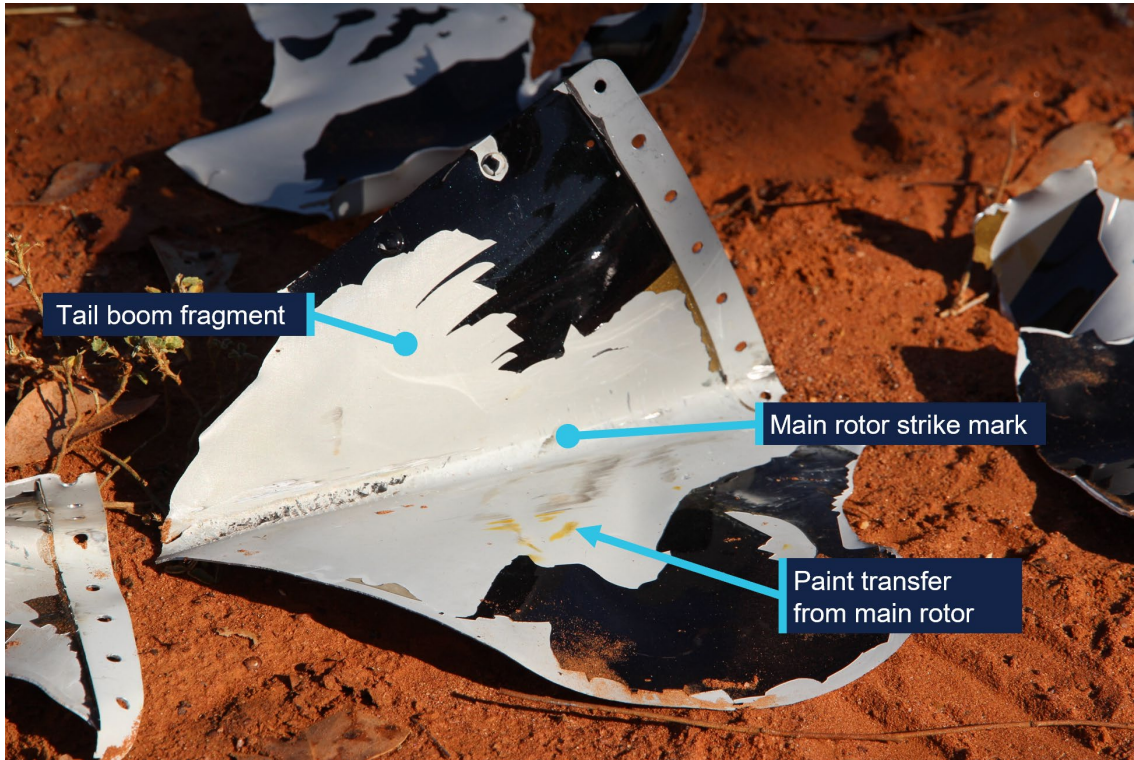
Source: ATSB

Both fuel tanks had ruptured due to impact forces. However, there was no fire.

Damage to the main rotor blades, tail boom, and other components indicated that the main rotor had impacted the tail boom in flight (Figure 3).

<sup>6</sup> An inversion layer is where the temperature increases with height, rather than decreasing as is normal. A low-level or surface inversion occurs when the ground cools overnight by radiating heat, also cooling the layer of air closest to the ground. These low-level inversions form a stable layer of air, typically extending a few hundred feet and prevent the higher altitude wind from mixing with the lower-level winds near the ground.

**Figure 3: Tail boom fragment showing main rotor strike mark**



Source: ATSB

Fragments of the tail boom were spread throughout a debris field that extended up to 400 m south of the main wreckage. The tail rotor and gearbox assembly was located about 250 m away from the main wreckage and sections of the tail rotor drive shaft were located throughout the debris field. This spread of debris, along with evidence of the main rotor striking the tail boom in flight, indicates that there was an in-flight break-up.

The impact damage limited the extent to which any pre-impact defects could be identified, however from the evidence available, no engine, flight control or structural issues were identified.

### Recorded data

The helicopter was fitted with a TracPlus unit that transmitted the helicopter's location, altitude, and groundspeed via satellite or a mobile phone network every 15 seconds. This information was monitored by the operator for search and rescue purposes.

The helicopter was also fitted with a Garmin Aero 660 GPS which was retained for further examination.

### Further investigation

To date, the ATSB has examined the accident site and wreckage, interviewed witnesses, collected meteorological data, aircraft maintenance and pilot records, and obtained flight tracking data.

The investigation is continuing and will include further review of:

- pilot records and medical information
- aircraft maintenance and flight records

- recovered components
- witness information
- meteorological data
- recorded aircraft tracking data.

Should a critical safety issue be identified during the course of the investigation, the ATSB will immediately notify relevant parties so appropriate and timely safety action can be taken. A final report will be released at the conclusion of the investigation.

## **Acknowledgements**

The ATSB gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the property owner to the investigation team.

# General details

## Occurrence details

Date and time:	20 April 2026 – 0729 EST	
Occurrence class:	Accident	
Occurrence categories:	In-flight break-up	
Location:	42 km south-east of Jericho, Queensland	
	Latitude: 23.9180° S	Longitude: 146.3282° E

## Aircraft details

Manufacturer and model:	Robinson Helicopter Co R22 Beta	
Registration:	VH-ESG	
Operator:	B & T Philp Pty Ltd	
Serial number:	4120	
Type of operation:	Part 91 General operating and flight rules	
Activity:	General aviation / Recreational-Other general aviation flying-Ferry flights	
Departure:	Tambo, Queensland	
Destination:	Lambton Meadows, Queensland	
Persons on board:	Crew – 1	Passengers – 0
Injuries:	Crew – 1 (fatal)	Passengers – 0 (none)
Aircraft damage:	Destroyed	

## About the ATSB

The **Australian Transport Safety Bureau** is the national transport safety investigator. Established by the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (TSI Act), the ATSB is an independent statutory agency of the Australian Government and is governed by a Commission. The ATSB is entirely separate from transport regulators, policy makers and service providers.

The ATSB's function is to improve transport safety in aviation, rail and shipping through:

- the independent investigation of transport accidents and other safety occurrences
- safety data recording, analysis, and research
- influencing safety action.

The ATSB prioritises investigations that have the potential to deliver the greatest public benefit through improvements to transport safety.

The ATSB performs its functions in accordance with the provisions of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* and Regulations and, where applicable, international agreements.

## Purpose of safety investigations

The objective of a safety investigation is to enhance transport safety. This is done through:

- identifying safety issues and facilitating safety action to address those issues
- providing information about occurrences and their associated safety factors to facilitate learning within the transport industry.

It is not a function of the ATSB to apportion blame or provide a means for determining liability. At the same time, an investigation report must include factual material of sufficient weight to support the analysis and findings.

At all times the ATSB endeavours to balance the use of material that could imply adverse comment with the need to properly explain what happened, and why, in a fair and unbiased manner.

The ATSB does not investigate for the purpose of taking administrative, regulatory or criminal action.

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