

Massachusetts Man Charged with illegally Operating a Helicopter from Backyard

An East Brookfield man was arrested Thursday, May 9 and charged in federal court in Worcester in connection with unlawfully operating an aircraft and making false statements to federal investigators.

Antonio Santonastaso, 59, was charged by criminal complaint with one count of serving as an airman without an airman certificate and one count of making false statements to federal agents. Santonastaso will appear in federal court in Worcester this afternoon.

According to the charging document, 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. FAA inspectors reviewed the path Santonastaso used when taking off and landing from his backyard, and concluded that it was extremely hazardous.

When questioned by the FAA and federal agents, Santonastaso repeatedly made false statements regarding his eligibility to pilot the helicopter. Among other things, Santonastaso falsely claimed to have not learned that the FAA had revoked his license, and made false statements regarding his applications for a medical certificate, which is required in order to operate an aircraft.

The charging statutes provide for a sentence of no greater than five 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 other statutory factors.

United States Attorney Andrew E. Lelling and Douglas Shoemaker, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of the Inspector General, made the announcement. Assistant U.S. Attorney Evan Panich of Lelling's Office is prosecuting the case.

The details contained in the charging documents are allegations. The defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.