By Dean Lithgow

On Saturday, 7 November 2009, my day started at 5.30 am, flying my AS350. It was just another perfect spray morning. But little did I know it was not going to stay that way for long! The job was spraying out hill country for cropping, so as you all know, boundaries need quite a lot of care with glyphosate.

While conducting the day’s briefing, the farm manager showed me a set of power lines that ran through the block with another set of lines branching off these. A telephone cable ran through the block as well. He repeated, “You have got those wires, Deano?” I replied, “Yes, thanks.”

I completed the first part of the block, and then I proceeded along an internal boundary on my second load, due to an awkward shape. Nearing the end of my run there was a loud bang, like a 308 gun going off. The machine shook but continued flying with a very slight vibration. Yes, it was a wire and, no, the farm manager had not been aware of it. All the electric fence wires on the property run along the tops of the posts, this one took a short cut across a gut (small gully). The wire had struck the pitot tube and run up along the windscreen protector into the scissor section. It had then broken the wire at that point, as it is designed to do.

I know there was no one else to blame but myself. The irony was that the Wire Strike Protection Kit (WSPK) that was fitted to my machine had actually sat on the bench in the company hangar for three years before being fitted. Since then, the helicopter has done around 800 hours. The fitting of the kit saved my life and the helicopter too.

Wires can appear in the strangest of places and you may not be told about them. So, if your helicopter does not have a WSPK, invest in one. You may not plan on flying through a wire, but it may save you, as it did me.

I believe I was trained by two of the best in the industry years ago. Both drummed the danger of wires into me, both in basic training through to commercial, then during my Ag training. I am not proud of hitting a wire but I am grateful my company installed the wire strike kit.

To my knowledge this is the first wire strike of a Squirrel helicopter in New Zealand with a kit on it. Usually, the outcome is a lot more severe.

I hope this spiel has not bored you but enlightened some. If a life or an aircraft can be saved through speaking out, it must be beneficial.