Low flights spark call for probe by Transport Canada

By DEANNA SIMPSON

A Markham pilot's low passes over rural fields during seeding manoeuvres has sparked an investigation by Transport Canada.

The federal department was called in last week following complaints from area residents about pilot Roger Hitchman's low altitudes in Markham's rural area.

According to investigator Bill Nash, "evidence is being gathered to start an investigation."

The pilot, working for John Doner's Ltd. of Gormley, has been planting a crop of soft white winter wheat, some of which will be sold on local store shelves.

But Mr. Doner maintains that nothing unusual is going on.

"What we are doing is perfectly legal. The only part that is difficult is getting to the field," he said this week. "Because the fields are only half a mile to a mile away, we don't have the room to climb to a high altitude."

But he said local residents don't realize the pilot is helping produce crops which feed them.

"Roger Hitchman is not flying for pleasure, he's not up there to harass them. He's doing his job," said Mr. Doner.

"This man is not some kid who doesn't know what he's doing," he added. "He has over 5,000 flying hours of experience and he knows what he's doing because he has to. Flying safely is his main aim."

The process being used requires a flyer to seed standing soybean fields with wheat.

"The pilot can cover 30 to 50 acres per hour. In this way, the 1,000 plus acres we're seeding here can be covered in a week to 10 days," explained Mr. Doner.

In a few weeks, the leaves will fall, covering the seed to form a mulch. Mr. Doner said the process is a form of 'conservation farming.'

The idea is popular because nutrients are taken from the leaves rather than the soil, saving the soil from being stripped of minerals.

Also, according to the local businessman, producing the crop is not as expensive as traditional methods because tilling is not required.

The lower cost "helps farmers, who have suffered due to the selling price of wheat, which hasn't changed in the last few years," added Mr. Doner.

The yield from this method of farming is also beneficial: in the past, crops have produced about 100 bushels per acre, which "is considered exceptional."

Mr. Hitchman continued seeding this week.

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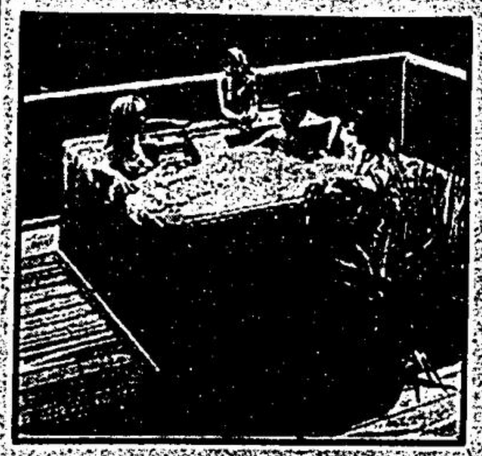

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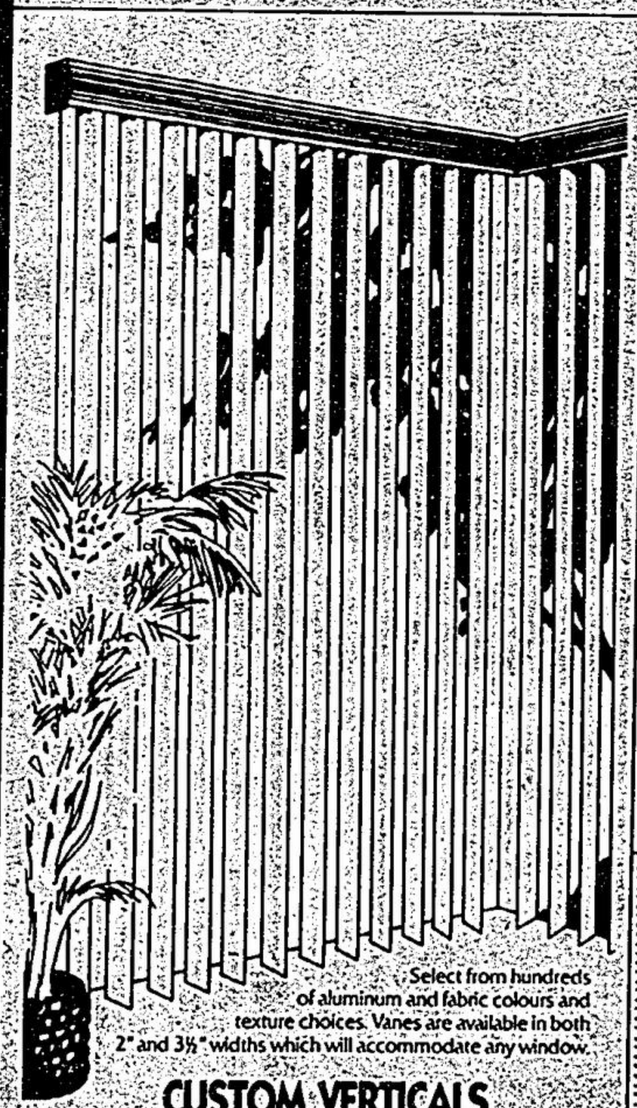

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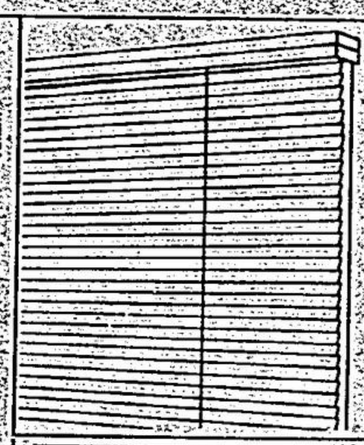

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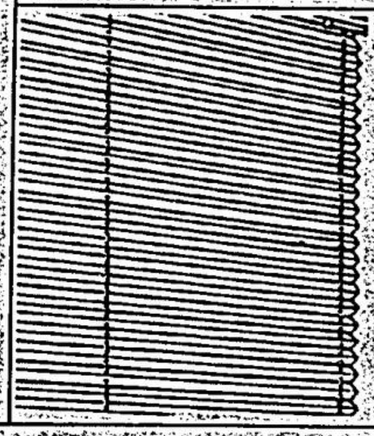

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