

Carter v. SkyGlide Balloon Systems

On October 12, 2026, a commercial sightseeing balloon operated by Horizon Balloon Tours departed from a launch site shortly after sunrise. The balloon, a SkyGlide “AeroMax 5000” hot air balloon (Exhibit 1), carried pilot Michael Reynolds and eight passengers.

Approximately 45 minutes into the flight, the balloon unexpectedly descended during what should have been a routine landing approach. Witnesses observed the balloon lose altitude rapidly before striking a power line and crashing into a nearby field.

Three passengers were killed, including 34-year-old Sarah Carter. Several others suffered serious injuries.

Following the crash, investigators discovered damage to the balloon’s burner fuel regulator assembly. A post-accident inspection suggested the regulator may have intermittently restricted propane flow, reducing burner output during a critical phase of flight (Exhibit 2).

Sarah Carter’s estate has filed a civil wrongful death and product liability lawsuit against SkyGlide Balloon Systems, alleging a defective fuel regulation system caused the crash.

SkyGlide denies liability, arguing that pilot error, shifting wind conditions, and inadequate preflight inspection by Horizon Balloon Tours caused the accident.

Exhibit 3 is a weather and flight path reconstruction showing increasing wind speeds shortly before the crash.

Plaintiff Witness 1: James Carter

Husband of Sarah Carter

Direct Examination

James Carter testifies that his wife booked the balloon tour expecting a safe recreational experience. He states that Horizon Balloon Tours advertised its equipment as professionally maintained and inspected. Following the accident, he learned investigators were examining a possible mechanical defect in the fuel system. He testifies that Sarah was healthy and had no reason to expect any unusual danger.

Cross-Examination

James admits he was not present during the flight. He has no firsthand knowledge of the balloon's operation, weather conditions, or pilot decisions. He acknowledges that ballooning carries some inherent risks.

Plaintiff Witness 2: Dr. Rachel Kim

Mechanical Engineering Expert

Direct Examination

Dr. Kim testifies that the fuel regulator is a critical safety component controlling propane delivery to the burners. She explains that testing of the recovered regulator revealed intermittent sticking that could reduce heat production. According to her analysis, the loss of burner output would have limited the pilot's ability to maintain altitude during landing.

She concludes that the regulator's design created an unreasonable risk of failure.

Cross-Examination

Dr. Kim admits she cannot determine the exact second the regulator malfunctioned. She acknowledges that weather conditions and pilot actions also influence balloon performance. She further concedes that not every regulator of this design has experienced failure.

Defense Witness 1: Mark Dalton

Safety Director, SkyGlide Balloon Systems

Direct Examination

Dalton testifies that the AeroMax 5000 met all applicable aviation safety requirements and underwent extensive testing before entering the market. He states that SkyGlide sold thousands of balloons without any fatal accidents attributed to the regulator design.

He further testifies that SkyGlide's maintenance manual requires periodic inspection of the fuel system and regulator assembly.

Cross-Examination

Dalton acknowledges that the company had received several reports of regulator sticking. He admits engineers investigated possible improvements to the design before the crash. He further concedes that laboratory testing cannot recreate every real-world flight condition.

Defense Witness 2: Dr. Steven Hale

Direct Examination

Dr. Hale testifies that weather conditions deteriorated during the flight. Wind speeds increased significantly during the landing phase, creating difficult operating conditions. His reconstruction indicates the pilot approached a landing area near power lines and delayed landing despite changing winds. He concludes that weather and pilot decision-making were the primary causes of the accident.

Cross-Examination Dr. Hale admits that a loss of burner performance would reduce a pilot's ability to respond to changing conditions. He acknowledges that if the regulator malfunctioned as alleged, it could have contributed to the crash.

EXHIBIT 1 – SkyGlide AeroMax 5000 Hot Air Balloon

Manufacturer: SkyGlide Balloon Systems

Model: AeroMax 5000

Passenger Capacity: 10 Persons

Fuel System: Dual propane tanks, automatic pressure regulator, dual burner assembly.

Advertising Claim: "The AeroMax 5000 combines industry-leading safety with reliable fuel delivery for smooth flight and controlled landings."



EXHIBIT 2 – Engineering Inspection Report

Prepared by Northwest Aviation Engineering Associates.

Post-accident inspection revealed intermittent sticking in the fuel regulator assembly.

Findings: Regulator valve displayed signs of intermittent sticking. Internal spring showed abnormal wear. Propane flow fluctuated during stress testing. Inspector's Conclusion: The regulator assembly demonstrated intermittent restrictions in propane flow that could reduce burner performance during flight.



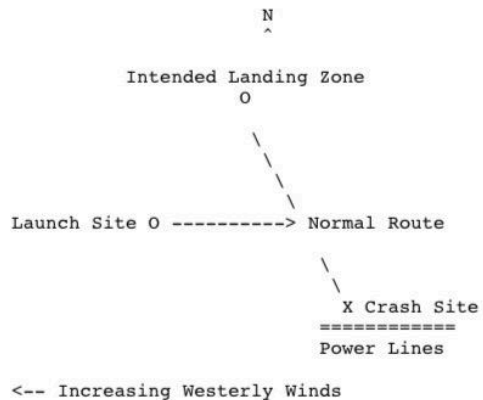
EXHIBIT 3

Flight Path & Weather Reconstruction

National Weather Service Data

Time Wind Speed Wind Direction 6:40 AM 8 mph SW 7:00 AM 11 mph SW 7:15 AM 15 mph WSW
7:25 AM 18 mph W

Reconstructed Flight Path



Investigator Notes

Wind speeds increased from 8 mph at launch to approximately 18 mph during the landing phase. Witnesses reported observing multiple burner activations immediately before the balloon descended into a utility corridor.