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*Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600*

Dear Committee Secretary,

PILOT TRAINING AND AIRLINE SAFETY

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission in relation to the Committee's inquiry into pilot training and airline safety.

These issues are of clear significance to the operators of all Australian airports, from major international gateways to the smallest of rural and remote landing strips. Inadequately trained and in-experienced pilots place not only themselves and any passengers at risk, but also those on the ground and, in particular, those at or around airports from which they depart or at which they seek to land.

Accordingly, the Australian Airports Association fully supports the Committee's inquiry and its potential for securing greater assurance as to the training and experience of Australia's pilots.

At the same time, however, it is pilots themselves, airlines and relevant regulators such as the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) and the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, rather than airport operators, who are best placed to offer substantive comment to the Committee in relation to the matters under review.

However, the Association does wish to draw to the attention of the Committee its concerns about the training and retention of other personnel who, with pilots, are equally essential in ensuring the safety of Australian aviation. While there has been much written recently about the lack of trained and skilled pilots, Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineers and air traffic controllers, the lack of skilled labour is a much more general issue for the whole of the industry.

Aviation safety fundamentally depends not only on aircraft being expertly flown, but on airports being expertly operated and maintained in an expert manner. This in turn requires both the necessary number of properly trained and experienced specialist airport staff and a capacity for regional, rural and remote airports to retain such staff for whom the incentive is otherwise to migrate to larger capital city airports.

Airport planning, airfield standards, obstacle limitation surface (OLS) and specialist engineers and qualified airfield lighting technicians are now in short supply and many rural and regional airports must rely on consultants, most of whom are at, or close to, retiring age. Former Airport Inspector and Pavement Specialist courses are long gone and even some of the specialist OLS airport courses previously offered by CASA appear to have been scaled back. The former Department of Transport and Regional Services undertook to provide a specialised security training framework for regional airports, but little has come of it.

The training issue is particularly important for secondary jet and regional airports, which otherwise need to rely on costly and centralised consultancy services. In the future, these 'limited' consultancy services may not be interested in the 'slim' pickings at smaller airports.

Many airports, in support of the service, economic and tourism requirements of their communities, particularly need to have regular public transport (RPT) air services to and from major population centres. For an airport to sustain RPT services, it requires the appropriate approvals from the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) and part of that approval process is that the airport must have suitably qualified and experienced airfield operational staff.

The simple fact is that, without local expertise necessary for the safe and secure running of an airport, there can be no RPT services, the absence of which would have a very detrimental impact on the local community and its wellbeing. The retention of qualified staff in remotely-located airports is always going to be difficult, particularly as the industry grows and 'good' staff embark on their own career development path that eventually leads them to the big, or bigger, airports. The introduction of a new aviation security regime for all RPT airports adds yet another dimension to training suitably-qualified staff to facilitate the airport's mandated 'Transport Security Program'.

The Association is concerned that there is no overall Government strategy to develop and train sufficient numbers of relevant types of airport staff, and insufficient taxation of similar incentives to assist smaller airports to retain the services of those qualified staff they are able to attract or foster.

While I appreciate that these matters are outside the terms of reference of the present inquiry, the Association does wish to urge that they be fully considered by the Committee in the course of a later inquiry.

Should you wish to discuss any aspect of the above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

*John McArdle
National Chairman*