



22 MAR, 2021

Angry Nats pushing change to aviation support package

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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David Crowe

Nationals MPs are on a collision course with federal ministers over a backbench proposal to offer temporary help to 40,000 workers so the travel industry can survive the looming halt to the JobKeeper wage subsidy.

The Nationals party room has backed a plan to adjust \$180 million in federal funding in a bid to protect workers who could be forced onto unemployment benefits when JobKeeper ends.

Angry the government has left some regions out of its \$1.2 billion plan for half-price flights to 13 destinations, the Nationals will meet today to decide how to force change to a related scheme to save travel agents.

Nationals MP Pat Conaghan has formal support from the federal party room to demand a \$180 million lifeline so travel agency workers can supplement their unemployment benefits, retain their skills and stay with their employers.

Mr Conaghan took the plan to the Minister for Trade and Tourism Dan Tehan last week but fears the government will "stone-wall" the Nationals.

"The aviation sector support of \$1.2 billion is effectively an extension of JobKeeper,

just dressed up differently," said Mr Conaghan, whose electorate of Cowper includes Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour.

"This new proposal will cost about a third of that \$1.2 billion and it will protect three times as many workers. And it is a real regional issue - it is all about jobs."

The proposal is to redirect \$180 million from the two assistance packages for travel agents, which gave them one-off payments in proportion to turnover.

Mr Conaghan said the money would be better spent as a top-up payment to the JobSeeker unemployment benefit because 80 per cent of the workers were women and 60 per cent of them were in the regions.

Travel agency staff who lose their jobs from March 31 would go onto the JobSeeker payment of \$620.80 per fortnight and receive a supplement of \$400 per fortnight. It would run for six months.

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg warned the party room last week to be prepared for a "rough couple of months" after JobKeeper ends on March 31, but he told the ABC that jobs would recover. "This has always been a temporary program. This was always an emergency payment."



**Nationals MP
Pat Conaghan**