

## **SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE**

Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

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*Inquiry into Regional Aviation, Freight Resilience and National Supply Chain Reform*

Submitted by:

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Australia's regional freight system is structurally constrained by centralisation, limited competition, and heavy dependence on long-haul road transport. Despite significant public investment in regional airport infrastructure over decades, many regional airports operate substantially below capacity, with underutilised runways, apron space and ground staff.

At the same time, regional businesses, hospitals, farmers and communities face escalating freight costs, supply chain delays, and vulnerability to extreme weather disruption.

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This submission proposes that Remotely Piloted Aerial System (RPAS), specifically platforms such as the Dronamics Black Swan operated from centralised network operations centres, represents a structural reform opportunity, a paradigm shift in regional supply chains.

The Black Swan has a 1000kg Maximum Take-off Weight (MTOW) and can carry a payload of 350 kg at a maximum range of 2,500 km and an operating altitude of up to 20,000 ft. The Black Swan is a fixed-wing uncrewed aircraft with a wingspan of 16 m, and a fuselage length of 8 m.

Unlike conventional crewed aircraft, remotely piloted freight aircraft:

- Remove onboard crew requirements
- Reduce operating costs per flight hour
- Enable flexible, point-to-point regional routing
- Operate efficiently from shorter regional runways
- Allow higher utilisation rates

This creates the foundation for a distributed regional freight network that:

- Reactivates underutilised regional airports
- Establishes new freight hubs
- Reduces freight costs
- Improves medical and emergency logistics
- Rebuilds sovereign aviation manufacturing capability

Indicative modelling suggests that national deployment across approximately 30 regional airports could generate:

- 500–1,000 direct aviation and logistics jobs
- 750–1,500 indirect supply chain jobs
- 10–25% freight cost reductions on contested routes
- 0.2–0.5% annual uplift in regional economic output in activated areas

In addition, domestic manufacturing of freight aircraft aligns with:

- The Made in Australia agenda
- National Reconstruction Fund objectives

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- Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre priorities
- Sovereign industrial resilience policy.

Australia previously maintained strong aircraft manufacturing capability. Re-establishing freight aircraft production would create highly-skilled aerospace engineering jobs, strengthen composite and avionics sectors, and provide export potential in a rapidly evolving cargo aviation market.

Case studies such as Whyalla and Cloncurry demonstrate how this model could:

- Improve spare parts logistics for industry
- Reduce medical supply delivery times
- Strengthen disaster response resilience
- Support agricultural export pathways
- Improve delivery times for online consumer purchases
- Increase airport utilisation and regional employment

This proposal does not replace passenger aviation. It complements it. It introduces competition into freight markets that are often thinly contested. It transforms regional airports from passive infrastructure into active logistics nodes.

In short, remotely piloted freight aviation represents a paradigm shift in freight logistics that can lower user costs, improve resilience, and rebuild domestic manufacturing capability while strengthening regional Australia.

Dronamics welcomes the opportunity to meet with you and discuss this submission.

Kym Anquetil

General Manager

Dronamics Airlines Australia Pty Ltd

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## **FULL SUBMISSION**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 This submission addresses the structural weaknesses within Australia's regional freight system and proposes a reform pathway through the introduction of remotely piloted cargo aircraft.

1.2 The submission focuses on economic activation of regional airports, supply chain resilience, sovereign manufacturing and national competitiveness.

### **2. Overview of Proposal**

2.1 The Dronamics Black Swan aircraft operates as a cargo-only platform remotely piloted from certified ground control centres.

2.2 This model reduces operational overhead, increases flexibility, and enables distributed freight networks across regional Australia.

### **3. Structural Weakness in Regional Freight**

3.1 Australia's freight network is heavily road dependent and capital city centred.

3.2 Many regional airports operate significantly below capacity despite existing infrastructure.

3.3 Current inefficiencies include:

- Concentrated freight handling in major airports
- Limited competition in regional air freight
- High road freight exposure to weather disruption
- Underutilised regional aviation assets

3.4 Indicative modelling shows regional freight costs are 15–35% higher per tonne-km than metropolitan equivalents.

## 4. Ground-Piloted Freight Aviation Model

4.1 Remotely piloted cargo aircraft remove onboard crew requirements and allow centralised ground control.

4.2 Structural advantages include:

- 30–50% lower operating cost per flight hour
- Reduced crew positioning and accommodation costs
- Increased aircraft utilisation
- Viability on lower-volume routes

4.3 This enables frequent, point-to-point regional freight operations.

## 5. Reactivation of Regional Airports

5.1 Freight-only aircraft movements can generate consistent airport activity independent of passenger volumes.

5.2 Operational activation would include:

- Freight handling
- Aircraft refuelling
- Ramp operations
- Basic maintenance support

5.3 Indicative employment per activated airport:

- 8–15 direct operational jobs
- 5–10 indirect logistics roles

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5.4 National scaling across 30 airports could generate up to 1,500 total jobs.

## 6. Creation of Regional Freight Hubs

6.1 Distributed freight networks allow development of secondary logistics hubs.

6.2 Benefits include:

- Agricultural aggregation
- E-commerce redistribution
- Industrial spare parts staging
- Export facilitation

6.3 Efficiency improvements of 10–20% could raise regional output by up to 0.5% annually.

## 7. Competitive Reform and Cost Reduction

7.1 Regional freight markets often operate with limited competition.

7.2 Remotely piloted aircraft lower entry barriers and capital intensity.

7.3 Expected outcomes include:

- 10–25% freight price reductions on contested routes
- Increased service frequency
- Improved small business competitiveness

## 8. Sovereign Manufacturing and Industrial Policy Alignment

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8.1 Domestic aircraft manufacturing aligns with national industrial strategy.

8.2 Policy alignment includes:

- Made in Australia
- National Reconstruction Fund
- Advanced manufacturing priorities
- Aerospace capability development

8.3 Indicative manufacturing impact:

- 250–400 direct aerospace jobs
- 500–800 supply chain jobs

8.4 This strengthens sovereign industrial capability and export potential.

## 9. Medical and Emergency Logistics

9.1 Remote freight aviation improves healthcare logistics in regional Australia.

9.2 Benefits include:

- 50–70% reduction in urgent medical transport times
- Faster pathology sample movement
- Improved pharmaceutical distribution
- Disaster logistics redundancy

## 10. Environmental Considerations

10.1 Optimised freight aircraft operations reduce heavy vehicle kilometers. The aircraft's airframe is constructed from composite materials. The Black Swan's powerplant consists of a certified piston engine (ROTAX 915iS) and a certified carbon-fiber propeller (manufactured by MT-Propeller). The current fuel consumption is 9.8lts per 100kms.

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## 10.2 Benefits include:

- Improved emissions efficiency per tonne-km
- Reduced backhaul inefficiencies
- Compatibility with sustainable aviation fuel and future hydrogen propulsion

## 11. Regional Case Studies

### 11.1 Whyalla, South Australia

- Industrial spare parts logistics
- Mining and steel supply chain support
- Freight hub creation
- 15–25 direct regional jobs

### 11.2 Cloncurry, Queensland

- Reduced freight vulnerability
- Faster medical delivery
- 8–12 operational jobs

## 12. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

12.1 Recognise remotely piloted freight aviation as a strategic reform opportunity.

12.2 Support regulatory frameworks enabling safe cargo-only remote operations.

12.3 Encourage development of regional freight hubs.



12.4 Consider incentives supporting domestic aircraft manufacturing.

12.5 Facilitate remote workforce capability through taxation off set.

## 13. Conclusion

13.1 Remotely piloted freight aircraft represent a structural transformation in regional aviation and supply chains by:

- Reactivating underused infrastructure
- Lowering freight costs
- Improving medical logistics
- Strengthening disaster resilience
- Rebuilding domestic aerospace capability
- Creating regional employment

13.2 Australia has the infrastructure.

13.3 Australia has the industrial capability.

13.4 The opportunity now is policy and whole of Government support.

