

State of Australia's aviation sector and its ability to deliver reliable and affordable services to rural, regional and remote communities

Committee: [Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee](#)

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Submission from Central Highlands Regional Council, Queensland

Central Highlands Regional Council (CHRC), Queensland, thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission on this key issue.

CHRC serves 13 communities with diverse interests and industries across 60,000 km² – a region nearly the size of Tasmania - with a total population of 27,836, including main centre Emerald, 14,904 (2021 Census).

Agriculture (beef, cotton and horticulture) and coal mining (thermal and coking) are the main industries, with the region lying in the coal-rich Bowen Basin and home to 11 mines and a large fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in-drive out (DIDO) workforce.

Emerald Airport services Brisbane and Sunshine Coast, with more than 217,000 passenger movements in 2024/25. QANTAS is largest airline provider at Emerald Airport, accounting for more than 2,700 aircraft movements.

While FIFO through Emerald airport is considerable, use by the public is most important – for work and travel to medical appointments, schools, universities and other educational institutions and for family reunions and holidays.

Those flying in and out of Emerald are not just from the CHRC region, but also from adjoining areas and towns.

Unfortunately, residents are forced to pay very high air fares to Brisbane and other centres. Everyone in the community suffers, particularly when having to travel at short notice for medical and family needs.

Central Highlands communities are really disadvantaged compared with other regional centres, such as Longreach and Moranbah, where residents have access to 'discounted fares' – under the QANTAS *Resident Fares* program, offering discounts (from 20% off the base fare, excluding taxes and charges) on return Economy fares from regional airports to their eligible city.

Virgin Australia's *Regional Fares Program* offers discounted, flexible return fares for residents of eligible areas, not including Central Highlands.

CHRC has worked for many years – holding meetings with airlines and State and Federal government representatives - to try and find a solution to redress the impact of very high airfares on the community.

The fact is a duopoly exists with QANTAS the main provider of publicly available air services. The company blames high fares on its operating costs. However, the operating costs are relatively fixed per passenger and in fact cheaper per passenger as the aircraft is operated closer to full. Yet air fares vary from as low as \$220 for a one-way flight to more than \$1,200 one way when the aircraft bookings are heaviest.

Ironically, it appears that the excessively expensive fares align with periods of QANTAS's inability to provide extra services in the busy early and late week routes rather than being based on a true cost base.

On top of this, flights are regularly cancelled with little warning, leaving passengers to either reschedule onto a later, more expensive flight or to drive three hours to Rockhampton airport for an alternate connection.

QANTAS reported an underlying profit before tax of \$2.39 billion and a statutory profit after tax of \$1.61 billion in FY2024/25. The underlying profit was a 15% increase on the previous year and the company's second-highest profit on record – up 28% on the previous year.

Virgin Australia posted an underlying net profit after tax of \$331 million, up 27.8% on FY2024.

During the pandemic QANTAS received \$2.7 billion in taxpayer' funds with Virgin receiving \$1.4 billion – money that is not being repaid by either company.

Residents of southeast Queensland and coastal centres (Bowen, Bundaberg, Cairns, Fraser Coast, Gladstone, Gympie, Innisfail, Kilcoy, Mackay, Rockhampton and Yeppoon, Townsville, and Whitsundays) enjoy permanent 50c fares on all public transport – allowing them to commute between work and home and attend medical appointments for \$1.

QANTAS does have a 'compassionate fare' program. While the discount is only 10%, the fares offer greater leniency with cancellations/rescheduling over standard tickets. However, the program is not widely known, and QANTAS could do more to publicise its availability for regional and remote residents.

Central Queensland residents are not looking for Chairman's Lounge treatment with free flights and upgrades for members and their families.

They simply want affordable and reliable services.

At the very least Central Highlands residents should have access to cheaper fares through the resident fare programs offered by the two major airlines in other regional

centres or balanced fares, aligned closer to the true cost bases rather than profit gouging on the heavy demand flights.

Thank you.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present.