



Centre of Full Employment and Equity

Rescue, fire fighting and emergency response capacity at Australian airports during the COVID-19 pandemic

AVIATION SAFETY AT AUSTRALIA'S AIRPORTS DURING COVID-19 - \$23B AT RISK

With planes grounded and filling airports' tarmacs, our quiet skies are also creating an unprecedented safety risk in Australia's airports, putting \$23 billion in assets at risk.

A lack of revenue from airlines has put Airservices Australia, which provides Aviation Rescue Fire Fighting Services (ARFFS) at the country's biggest and busiest 27 airports, under significant financial pressure. The response has been to force crews to take leave and now there are fears redundancies will permanently shrink the workforce.

Despite the mass grounding, each day planes must go through regular maintenance, which carries the risk of something going wrong. Sydney Airport has 90 aircraft stored, while Brisbane has 70, Avalon has 36, and Adelaide has 15. There's an estimated \$16.2 billion worth of aircraft assets at risk - if these assets go there is no aviation industry in Australia.

While air traffic may be significantly reduced, the work of ARFFS hasn't. Between March and June aviation fire fighters responded to 700 incidents.

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A report by University of Newcastle's Centre of Full Employment and Equity found underfunded, and scaled



Ground damage is an under-appreciated aviation safety hazard, as an aircraft full of fuel at the gate is akin to a bomb in a confined space.¹ Sydney has 90 aircraft stored, while Brisbane has 70, Avalon has 36, and Adelaide has 15.



58% of Australia's interstate travel is by air

back fire crews at Australia's airports are creating a risk to billions of dollars of assets and vital infrastructure.

MAINTAINING AUSTRALIA'S AVIATION SAFETY RECORD BEYOND COVID-19

When we return to the skies, we need to be ready on the ground. Two thirds (58%) of Australia's interstate travel is by air, but without proper investment in



\$16.2 billion worth of grounded aircraft, and more than \$7 billion in airport assets are protected by ARFFS staff - without their protection they are at risk

Airservices to provide aviation rescue and fire fighting Australia's entire aviation industry won't be able to snap back post-COVID-19.

Aviation fire fighters are highly specialised, with crews trained to respond to an incident within two minutes to prevent a minor incident becoming a catastrophic disaster. This isn't work that can be done by civil fire fighters.

Uncertainty surrounding Airservices funding model is forcing Australian airports to scale back their aviation rescue and fire fighting crews. But this isn't a tap that can be turned on and off again - aviation safety requires consistent upkeep and investment, otherwise our airports are left exposed.



ARFFS respond to all emergencies at airports and in the local area

Airservices Australia can be directed to maintain current staffing levels by the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development Michael McCormack.



Between March and June they responded to more than 700 incidents

¹ (James, M.L. (1997) Airspace Safety: Air Traffic Control and Airline Operations in Australia. (Background Paper No. 10 97-98). Information and Research Service, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia: Canberra.)

FINDINGS FROM RECENT SENATE REPORT FOUND AIRSERVICES WAS ALREADY UNDER RESOURCED

Aviation rescue and fire fighting is core to maintaining Australia's aviation safety standards and international reputation. Our entire aviation industry, from domestic travel, freight and international tourism, rely on trusting incidents can be properly responded to.

In 2019, the Senate called for an overhaul of Australia's aviation rescue and fire fighting system, to bring it in line with international standards. COVID-19 can't be an excuse to abandon this overdue reform.

Airport safety and asset protection needs to be managed with public safety as its core mission. The risk of under investing in this isn't just about catastrophic loss of life and damage, but also to protect and maintain Australia's international safety reputation.

KEY FACTS

ARFFS are stationed at 27 airports across Australia. More airports would require ARFFS if Australia followed the same guidelines used by the US, UK or New Zealand.

Australian airports use a lower than recommended minimum ARFFS staffing levels.

In 2019, the Senate recommended an overhaul of how ARFFS categories are designated at airports, raising concerns Australia may be putting its aviation sector at unnecessary risk.

ARFFS officers need more than six years of training and are able to manage an incident in three minutes.



Approximately 38% of airline accidents that result in fatal injury occur on or near the ground.²

Airport	Original ARFF category	Covid-19 level	ARFFS protected assets
NSW			
Sydney	10	9	Sydney Airport has about \$3.5 billion worth of assets, plus 90 planes stored. It also has the JUHI which stores 29 million liters of fuel.
Coffs Harbour	6	5	Prior to COVID-19 this busy airport was about to be upgraded to category 7. ARFFS protect helicopter operations, Air Ambulance; Australian Defence Force aircraft; fuel farm/storage unit with approximately 70,000 litres of stored and dispensed fuel; large gas storage and distribution centre. Additional safety concerns surround the cessation of the air traffic control tower on weekends.
QLD			
Brisbane	9		Australia's largest airport, recently opened its new runway. It has 70 grounded aircraft and the airport's assets are worth \$3.5 billion.
Cairns	8	5-7	Assets include The Royal Flying Doctors Service; QG Air; JUHI (currently holding 1.2 million litres); BP/ Vital fuel installations (hold 8,4000 litres of Avgas and 170,000 litres Avtur with multiple tanker trucks); aircraft hangers or terminal and other buildings as follows below. All maintenance aircraft hangers have continued maintenance during the COVID-19 restrictions.
Gladstone	6	6	A town with a high industry presence, Gladstone relies on ARFFS to assist local fire fighting.
Rockhampton	6	5	Terminal upgrades with hot works and close proximity to the Defence Forces, increase the current risk at Rockhampton.
VIC			
Avalon	8	5	Avalon Airport is one of the major areas to store large aircraft which require daily maintenance, including 36 stored aircraft. Additional airport assets include: Victorian Police Helicopter; Victorian Air Ambulance; Marine Ports helicopter; and a new helicopter base to house and operate multiple helicopters and aircraft.
ACT			
Canberra	8	7	Canberra has seen an increase of both RAAF VIP and diplomatic flights since the pandemic. Airport assets include: major terminal building; retail, building and office complexes; underground fuel system (approx. 750,000 litres of fuel stored and dispensed) and Boeing 717 maintenance facility.
SA			
Adelaide	9	5-7	Adelaide Airport is the alternative airport for large Melbourne, Sydney and Perth flights. Around 15 large aircraft are currently receiving maintenance.
NT			
Darwin	8	6-8	Military activity with large aircraft continues at Darwin amid the pandemic.

² (Boeing (2018) Statistical Summary of Commercial Jet Airplane Accidents, Worldwide Operations 1959 – 2017. Boeing: Seattle.)