



Weekend Australian  
Saturday 11/2/2023  
Page: 5  
Section: General News  
Region: Australia Circulation: 219,242  
Type: National  
Size: 307.00 sq.cms.  
Frequency: -----S-

Brief: DPLAUTO2



# Aircraft vanishing from ‘second-rate’ radar

**EXCLUSIVE**

**MATTHEW DENHOLM**

Aircraft are regularly disappearing from radars on approach to Queensland’s busy Rockhampton and Mackay airports, with air traffic controllers blaming “not-fit-for-purpose” radars and warning of “compromised safety”.

The Weekend Australian has obtained detailed radar coverage logs, revealing 221 incidents of aircraft dropping off radars on approach to the two airports from

July 27, 2022 to January 26, 2023. These logs show aircraft disappearing from radars usually for moments or minutes, but sometimes longer, with comments such as “did not return at all”, “never returned”, and “leaving surveillance coverage intermittently”.

Pilots have been warned to expect delays and airspace restrictions to work around the problem, which controllers say is due to a radar system “not fit for purpose” and needing urgent improvement.

Controllers say the approach by aircraft to Rockhampton and Mackay was previously handled

by the local air traffic control tower. However, due to increased traffic, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority directed Airservices Australia to provide a stand-alone radar approach service.

The problem, controllers say, is that Airservices has balked at the cost of installing a new Terminal Approach Radar, or TAR system, tailor-made for tracking arriving aircraft.

“A TAR has a specific scan rate that makes it suitable for use for approach – the (en route) radar being used for Mackay and Rockhampton approach is not a TAR, therefore they are having issues,” said an experienced controller, speaking on condition of anonymity.

“Radar tracks will drop out for periods of time while making an

approach to Mackay or Rockhampton, making them temporarily invisible to the controller.

“We see an approach service being provided with a radar not fit for purpose... This is what happens when you don’t put the required time, money and resources into providing an adequate approach service – safety is compromised.”

One controller described the situation was “not as safe as it should be” and said that at the very least improvements should be made by installing more ground signal stations – known as ADS-B sites – in the area to address the

black spots. The ADS-B system uses equipment on board aircraft to broadcast its precise location to ground stations, which relay them to air traffic control.

An Airservices Australia spokeswoman said there was no threat to public safety but that radar and ADS-B improvements in the area were planned.

“Claims of any safety threat to the travelling public at Rockhampton and Mackay airports are irresponsible and inaccurate,” the spokeswoman said. “No aircraft safety incidents have occurred.

“Our technical experts developed a solution to the issues raised during this (radar gap log) program that increases radar coverage and will be implemented within the next three months.

“An additional surveillance safety measure, ADS-B, will be implemented at both Rockhampton and Mackay in the first half of 2024, once the required safety assessments have been completed and approved.”

Sources said Airservices had issued official Notices to Airmen warning of “delays and restrictions” due to radar issues, covering areas within 20NM of Rockhampton,

below 6000ft, and northwest of Mackay, also below 6000ft.

Controllers say when the radar drops out, they must use other ways to separate aircraft, including directing planes to different alti-

tudes and denying smaller aircraft access to controlled airspace. Such measures had caused delays.

Dozens of safety risk reports had been made about the radar gaps. However, it is understood at least one shift manager had been asked to stop submitting them.

The log was started to try to provide a better understanding of areas of greatest concern.

**‘Radar tracks will drop out for periods of time, making them temporarily invisible’**

**AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER**