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Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
(by email to rrat.sen@aph.gov.au)

Senate Inquiry into Airservices Australia's management of aircraft noise

Below is discussion of a number of issues relevant to your Inquiry. I draw on my PhD study of aviation related issues, and community experience of two suburbs in Canberra (namely, Hackett, which is adjacent to the flight path from Canberra Airport, and the inner Belconnen suburb of Cook.)

1. ASA's Noise Enquiry Service

Although ASA's Webtrak service has been favourably received by those in the community seeking specific information on aircraft noise, ASA's Noise Enquiry Service for lodging complaints about aircraft noise has been generally perceived as being ineffective and of little use. The name "Noise Enquiry Service" underlines its passive nature. People find that lodging complaints produces little feedback of value, and quickly conclude that their actions are merely adding to a database of noise complaints. Complaints may be directed to the relevant airport, but feedback is not generally received. If it is, it is generally a justification of whatever the aviation industry is doing.

The role of the "Enquiry" service appears to be to determine whether aircraft operations comply with regulations and procedures. In many cases, it appears that aircraft noise complaints are a reflection of inadequate aspects of the noise abatement area provisions and procedures. That is, complaints are about the policies in place rather than compliance with the existing regulations and procedures. However, such negative feedback does not appear to have been used by Airservices Australia as a means of improving the regulations and procedures.

An example is provided by light aircraft flying for some hours on weekends near to where I live in the suburb of Cook in Canberra. One particular case involved a light aircraft doing "loop the loops" and delivering an annoying background drone near and over the suburb for an extended period. I rang the ASA Noise Enquiry line and was subsequently supplied with a map, showing the aircraft's flight path from the airport, many squiggles showing its activity near and over the suburb, then its return flight path to the airport. End of story.

Complainants must have some feeling that authorities will listen to their complaints,

and that their complaining will do some good. Thus, if a noisy party is causing a problem, contacting police can result in action to rectify the situation. If a neighbour has a noisy air-conditioner, one can take action through the local environmental authority to have the situation rectified, assuming the air-conditioner is rated as being above the standard set by legislation to protect community amenity. By contrast, the Airservices Noise Enquiry Service has little (if any) power to act to remedy complainant's concerns about aircraft noise.

2. Light aircraft activity

Near the suburb where I live (Cook in Canberra), light aircraft can often be heard on weekends for some hours creating a background drone over the suburb. Even one plane (with perhaps one or two occupants) can shower a suburb in noise pollution, impacting on many people. The noise may be just "annoying", but is a good demonstration of noise pollution of the many by the few.

In Canberra, most of the light aircraft activity appears to be for training operations. There does not appear to be any reason of substance why such flights should be conducted over residential areas, as forestry and rural leases exist where such flights would be much less disruptive. Indeed from a safety aspect, there appears to be good reason to not overfly suburbs in single-engined aircraft. (In the case of Cook, a rural area adjacent to the suburb is not much better).

3. Contradictions related to the role of Airservices Australia and the way in which aircraft noise is considered

A problem lies in a conflict of interest within the core roles of Airservices Australia. As the name Airservices Australia suggests, an alliance exists between the agency and the aviation industry, including a close relationship with respect to funding, with ASA's funding going up or down depending on how the aviation industry is performing. It is common for regulators to identify closely with the groups they regulate and to come to see the issues and solutions similarly.

Because of conflicting roles, Airservices Australia is unable to address negative feedback from the community constructively, as it is committed to and constrained by the growth paradigm subscribed to by various spheres of government and the airline industry. Addressing the aircraft noise issue properly requires an agency whose primary role is linked to environmental and quality of life concerns, and which is able to investigate and act on the ramifications for quality of life, of the continuing growth in the aviation industry.

A related issue concerns what constitutes "undue aircraft noise". Just what aircraft noise levels are acceptable is a contested one, with the approved noise dose being poorly defined. The World Health Organization has highlighted a range of adverse health effects associated with noise and expressed concern about the deteriorating noise environment in many countries. Aircraft noise at night is of particular concern, because of sleep disturbance and associated effects on people's health. A recent study demonstrated increased blood pressure in people living near an airport, as they sleep, with important ramifications for health. Further, noise is much more than an acoustic problem, but a social and evaluative issue too. With respect to standards

for health and amenity, there are also strong contradictions. A neighbour's noisy air-conditioner or sound system can be policed via local environmental legislation (in the ACT, 45 dBA during the day and 35 dBA at night), whereas aircraft noise many times these levels is not yet controlled for its effects on health and amenity. That is, industry criteria have been allowed to overrule health criteria. This is quite illogical.

Community groups in Canberra and the ACT region have also expressed strong concerns about significant loopholes in the noise abatement area provisions that currently apply. For example, so-called "non noise-abatable aircraft" such as light aircraft that produce considerable noise, are still allowed to fly over residential noise abatement areas at low altitudes. The same applies to jet and turbo-prop aircraft engaged in circuit training. In this sense the noise abatement area provisions are perceived by community groups as being framed in an arbitrary way in relation to protecting people from aircraft noise.

4. Principles for understanding aircraft noise vis-à-vis the community

The Federal Infrastructure department has previously outlined some principles and guidance material for better understanding aircraft noise (Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2000; Environment Australia & Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2003).

The broad principles are:

- (a) *Transparency*: communicating to the public in everyday language, and using information that can easily be verified by the public (WebTrak has been helpful in this regard, although its existence is probably not widely known at this point)
- (b) *Inclusiveness*: not excluding people from information because the standard indicates that noise is not a problem
- (c) *Empowerment of the individual*: placing the individual in a position where they can form their own view on the acceptability of future noise.

5. Community Consultation Charter

If Airservices Australia were to have a Community Consultation Charter as raised in the inquiry terms of reference, it is most important that:

- (a) health and environmental criteria, including relevant research findings, are given far more attention, with the contradictions between the standards for aircraft noise being brought into line with the standards applicable for community noise
- (b) Airservices Australia is given meaningful powers to act on aircraft noise pollution, and is perceived by the community as having such power through its actions to remedy aircraft noise pollution

- (c) standards are consistent. Why should there be such things as so-called “non noise-abatable aircraft” if they produce noise pollution over communities?
- (d) community concerns are acted on, rather than sidelined in favour of industry priorities
- (e) communities are empowered as suggested in the principles outlined at 4 above. Bogus consultative processes promote cynicism and disempowerment in the community.

Regards

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References

- Department of Transport and Regional Services. (2000). *Discussion paper: Expanding ways to describe and assess aircraft noise*. Canberra: DOTARS.
- Environment Australia, & Department of Transport and Regional Services. (2003). *Guidance material for selecting and providing aircraft noise information*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.