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Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
ACT 2600

Online submission: <https://senate.aph.gov.au/submissions>

For the attention of the RRAT Committee,

Re: Inquiry into the impact and mitigation of aircraft noise

Thank you for your invitation of 12 February 2024 to contribute to the inquiry into the impact and mitigation of aircraft noise on residents and business in capital cities and regional towns.

In providing this submission, it is not our objective for our views to be used to support claims for one side or another. We provide the submission to assist the Committee in their understanding of the issues from our unique perspective.

If there are any questions regarding this request, please contact the undersigned.

Yours faithfully,

Peter McGuane
Executive Secretary



Thank you for your invitation of 12 February 2024 to contribute to the inquiry into the impact and mitigation of aircraft noise on residents and business in capital cities and regional towns.

The Civil Air Operations Officers Association of Australia (“Civil Air”) is a registered organisation under the *Fair Work Act (Registered Organisations) Act 2009*. Civil Air was established in 1948, and the Association has eligibility to represent members employed in civilian air traffic control and air traffic services in Airservices Australia. Civil Air directly represents over 80% of employees eligible to be members of the Union.

Australia has one of the safest aviation environments in the world. Our air traffic control (ATC) system significantly contributes to this estimable reputation and air traffic control officers (ATCOs) play a critical role by ensuring the safe, orderly, and expeditious flow of air traffic.

Our membership has an intimate and enduring relationship with the Australian aviation sector, performing a key role in the daily operations of the industry, whilst maintaining regulatory and professional standards of safety and efficiency.

Most of our members are employees of Airservices Australia (“Airservices”), the Commonwealth statutory agency responsible for the provision of air navigation services in Australia and certain surrounding territory. As such, our submissions relate largely to the operations of Airservices.

We would like to make clear that whilst we are a registered industrial organisation, our position as outlined in this submission, should be read through the prism of our role as a professional association. Our submission is intended to be constructive and to assist the Government in their consideration of the issues.

Despite the many uncertainties we experienced through the impacts of COVID on the aviation industry, the one thing we all learned is the incredible resilience the industry has to global adversity, and the insatiable appetite the public has for aviation travel.

As we return to pre-COVID traffic levels, we are again reminded that environmental protection will influence the future of not just aviation but all human activity. Aviation and Air Traffic Management will continue to face increasing public scrutiny, already tainted by an increasing notion that flying is bad for the environment in terms of both noise and pollution.

Managing the impact of aviation on environment can easily be construed as an airline, pilot and ATC ‘problem’. However, the fundamental rules, regulations and operational concepts of the aviation system need to be carefully unpacked and examined, as does the resulting expectations of our “duty” to the community which also must be carefully and thoughtfully managed.

It is often unclear how global policy, and aspirations translate to the individual role of the air traffic controller. Politically driven conversations do not naturally connect to a safety-first, heavily regulated air traffic control environment. Civil Air’s desire is to ensure our members are offered every chance to deliver world leading environmental outcomes, but this is only possible with a new focus on innovation, operational support tools, clear policies for planning and impact management, and ATC education.

This submission to the Inquiry into the impact and mitigation of aircraft noise has been provided to draw attention to one component that is rarely considered, yet of extreme importance and concern to our membership - the ongoing welfare of our ATCOs.

Firstly, Civil Air acknowledges the impacts that aircraft noise has on our communities.

Civil Air also acknowledges that the impacts of new aircraft and ATM technology can improve outcomes but can also concentrate noise due to increasingly accurate track-keeping capabilities.

Civil Air believes that to achieve any substantial change, ATC staffing for both operational resilience and for change management/training requires significant investment to achieve world's-best-practice noise outcomes for our communities.

We ask anyone that is impacted by noise to please seek professional help to manage the personal impacts they are experiencing.

Our air traffic control members who operate in the Terminal Control units (TCU's) and in our Towers provide world-leading operational outcomes to ensure the safety of our travelling public. The complexity of these operations is not able to be addressed in this submission, but it involves decades of training, procedure development and extensive experience to manage the many competing priorities that occur in close proximity to our airports. These competing priorities include, but are not limited to:

- Department of Defence flying operations;
- Convective weather management;
- Runway change management;
- Airwork, survey and scenic flight operations;
- Pilot flight training;
- Emergency police operations;
- Fire and flood rescue operations;
- Critical MEDEVAC and mercy flight priority operations;
- Daily staffing constraints; and
- the overarching requirement to safely manage aircraft operations may require that aircraft not fly published procedures.

Our members are increasingly being scrutinised by the public for a perceived lack of expertise in managing noise outcomes for communities. This scrutiny is often delivered as personal attacks on the skills and character of our members. This is not acceptable.

During a familiarisation visit by community noise representatives to the Brisbane Air Traffic Services Centre, our members were subject to disruption in the operations room, whilst controlling air traffic, which culminated in community noise representatives being escorted from the room. Conversation quickly became accusatory with our members having to defend their profession, skills, experience and adherence to strict procedures. Civil Air does not agree that this behaviour should ever occur in our workplace.

One of our members experienced an intrusive personal attack, whereby an anti-noise community member discovered where they lived and delivered threatening and intimidating information to this employee's home. This is categorically unacceptable and must not happen. We are aware that there are Facebook groups in support of the issues surrounding noise outcomes for communities, allowing disparaging comments and unfounded criticism of ATCs in Brisbane, and the staff involved in the design of flight paths.

Any noise impact is a strategic problem that requires a strategic solution. It cannot be fixed by one decision that is either made or not made in response to one aircraft or flight planned route. Operational control decisions are never personal, and they are not made in isolation; they are made collaboratively with the Tower, other airspace users, and with ATC's that operate outside of the terminal control unit. The overriding priority of safety first always applies, and this may mean that an aircraft may not remain on their published flight path due to the presence of convective weather along that route. When emergencies occur, in a wide range of scenarios, the priority to ensure welfare will dictate that some procedures cannot be adhered to. This is globally accepted air traffic management practice and has occurred in Australia for many decades.

Our members attach a significant level of pride to their actions at work and are proud essential service providers. They are highly trained and continue to deliver outcomes that meet all of societal needs with regard to safe travel. The relentless attacks on our profession and character can no longer be tolerated. This situation has now impacted our members welfare, some of whom no longer wish to work in terminal control unit operations and are receiving professional assistance, with respect to their mental wellbeing. Other members will not publicly identify that they are a Brisbane air traffic controller, for fear they will be ridiculed or challenged as to their role in managing noise outcomes by people who are ill-informed with regards to the strict ruleset that ATC must adhere to. An air traffic controller's priority is to safety and efficiently guide aircraft to take off and land. They should not experience additional pressure on any or all decisions they make, especially with the current level of scrutiny that makes them feel "guilty, until proven innocent." We believe Airservices need to advocate for their staff and our profession and reinforce that these employees are making decisions based on safety alone and acting in accordance with ruleset.

The role of ATC at any airport is the same. The infrastructure changes that happened in Brisbane will also occur in Western Sydney, Melbourne and Perth with additional runways and infrastructure on the horizon. We are concerned that this will again expose our members to personal attacks, unfounded scrutiny and criticism. We believe that this will continue unless new policy and direction is developed for how our airports and airspace need to operate to support balanced noise outcomes. We ask that the Senate Inquiry, the Department, CASA and Airservices develop the appropriate policy, guidance, education and innovation so that our members can continue to operate professionally, without continual community scrutiny as to the tactical operational decisions they make.

Civil Air is committed to support better noise outcomes for our communities. Today, we call for all stakeholders to collaboratively develop policy and guidance, grow our environmental stewardship, show strong leadership and ensure we deliver the best noise outcomes possible for our communities.