



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Transport Safety Bureau**

**Chief Commissioner**

1 November 2019

Mrs Lucy Wicks MP  
Chair  
Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via Secretariat email: [jcpaa@aph.gov.au](mailto:jcpaa@aph.gov.au)

Dear Mrs Wicks

**Efficiency and Effectiveness: Inquiry into Auditor-General's Reports 25, 29, 38, 42, 44, 45 and 51 (2018-19)**

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee's Inquiry into Auditor-General's Reports 25, 29, 38, 42, 44, 45 and 51 (2018-19). The report concerning the ATSB is No.29 'Efficiency of Investigation of Transport Accidents and Safety Occurrences.' The ATSB welcomed and cooperated fully with the ANAO audit recognising the benefit of an independent review of the agency's operational efficiency. The ATSB agreed with the four recommendations presented within the final report and is utilising these recommendations to shape our agency's work into the future.

We were pleased the ANAO found that the ATSB has established key elements of an overall framework to promote efficient investigation processes. Likewise, the acknowledgement of a number of actions that had already been taken by the ATSB to introduce improvements, including formalising aspects of a program-managed approach to investigations. As demonstrated through the report, the ATSB is striving to ensure that our investigation reports are delivered in a timely manner while balancing the need to ensure the evidence-based quality that will identify the systemic safety issues that lead to safety action being taken by regulators, operators and industry participants. Our reports are also utilised by State coroners in the course of inquests.

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During 2018–19, the ATSB benchmarked its performance against similar accident investigation agencies overseas. We are pleased that our performance is comparable with a number of internationally respected agencies. The median length of time we take to complete an investigation is slightly higher by comparison, although the ATSB completes more safety investigation reports per investigator than some of its comparators.

As a result of a New Policy Proposal (NPP) in 2017, the ATSB on-boarded a large cohort of 17 new transport safety investigators who commenced in 2018 – this new cohort will be a key enabler in further enhancing our efficiencies as their competencies continue to develop and mature.

## RESPONSE TO ANAO RECOMMENDATIONS

*Recommendation 1: The ATSB implement strategies that address the decline in the timely completion of short investigations.*

The ATSB is addressing the decline in timeliness for short investigations through the allocation of dedicated resources, within the current organisational structure, to undertake short investigations.

*Recommendation 2: The ATSB report on the efficiency with which it uses resources in undertaking investigations.*

As detailed in the report, the ATSB already collects information about investigation efficiency, including investigator effort and costs. The ATSB is working towards using this information more effectively by adopting a data strategy that provides greater access to business information, introducing a program management approach to investigations that allows for improved investigation tracking, and formalising investigation processes - including planning and reviews.

*Recommendation 3: The ATSB establish more realistic targets for investigation timeframes addressing both calendar and investigator (effort) days.*

We agreed with the ANAO view that the 12 month timeframe for complex investigations was not realistic, given the work involved in evidence collection, analysis and articulating findings for safety issues affecting significant parts of the aviation, rail and marine transport industries. Of note, was the significant exchange of data and information with international operators and manufacturers, over which the ATSB has little control of response time-frames. The ATSB released a varied Corporate Plan during the year to put in place more suitable key performance indicators for timeliness and demand/capacity.

The ATSB now has a key performance indicator of “21 month average to complete complex investigations” which more accurately reflects the current demand and capacity situation of the ATSB. As the ATSB implements the measures to achieve greater efficiency, this average timeframe will gradually reduce over the ensuing reporting periods. The ATSB notes though that the time taken to complete complex investigations is comparable to the time taken by its counterparts around the world. As at 30 September 2019, the ATSB is undertaking 155 transport safety investigations.

In 2019–20, the ATSB will undertake a review of its current set of deliverables and key performance indicators to determine whether they can be amended to better articulate the agency’s evolving services and contributions to transport safety and also to ensure the performance indicators are within the control of the ATSB. The ATSB will seek to make its performance criteria reflect the best practice recommendations from the ANAO’s *Public Governance Performance and Accountability Act 2013*, Implementation and Corporate Planning audits – ANAO report 33 2017–18 and ANAO report 36 2017-18.

*Recommendation 4: The ATSB continue to progress actions that it has recently commenced to benchmark its investigation performance against relevant international comparators and use the results to identify strategies to improve its performance.*

The ATSB recognises that benchmarking is a valuable activity and there is significant scope to progress this work at an international level with counterpart agencies. Benchmarking is a shared responsibility and no international transport safety investigation agency has yet conducted such an activity. The ATSB is pleased to lead the way and has undertaken to establish and facilitate a benchmarking program with other countries within the International Transportation Safety Association (ITSA). ITSA will meet in Australia in 2020.

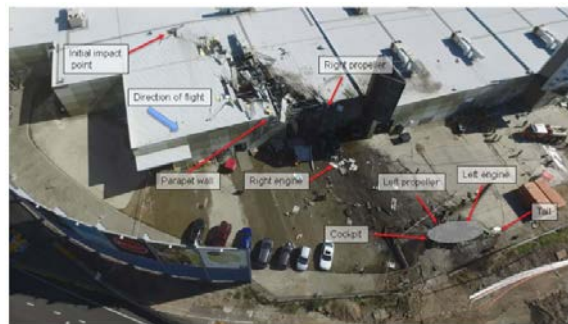
## **QUALITY AND OUTCOMES FOCUSED**

The ATSB has undertaken a significant transformational change commencing in early 2017, including the largest recruitment exercise in the agency’s history. It will take some further time to realise the full benefit of this new cohort of investigators. We acknowledge also that the time that goes into training and mentoring has reduced capacity for investigations. However, consistent with our programmed managed approach to investigations, in the longer term we will have greater capacity to undertake investigations with higher levels of efficiency.

In the interim, we have not lost our focus on quality and safety improvement through our investigations. An overview of some of our recent work is provided below.

## Significant Investigations

While the ATSB has been undertaking a program of improvement we have continued to make significant contributions to safety. In the last year we released the final report from our investigation into a King Air aircraft's collision with a building in a retail precinct at Melbourne's Essendon Airport in 2017 (AO-2017-024).



The investigation found the aircraft's rudder trim was set incorrectly for take-off, resulting in a loss of directional control. The investigation drew upon the ATSB's world-leading human factors capabilities, which resulted in safety messaging around the use of checklists as an essential tool for overcoming limitations with pilot memory and ensuring action items are completed in sequence without omission. This messaging highlights the ATSB's approach to safety investigation, which is to ensure that all the lessons can be learnt to help stop accidents in the future.

On an international level, the ATSB's contribution to safety was exemplified by the release of our final report from the investigation into a serious incident involving an ATR 72 turboprop airliner, which experienced an inadvertent pitch disconnect following an in-flight upset. This resulted in serious structural damage to the aircraft's horizontal tailplane (AO-2014-032). The investigation into this complex event identified a number of safety factors, including some in relation to the continuing airworthiness of the aircraft, and aircraft certification standards. As a consequence, the ATSB issued Safety Recommendations to the European Union Aviation Safety Agency to review the current design standards in consideration of the effect that dual pilot control inputs may have on the safe operation of an aircraft.



In rail, we released a report for a derailment of a freight train near Dry Creek, South Australia in July 2017 (RO-2017-008). There had been a break in the section of track that was precipitated by a defect in the rail introduced in the manufacturing process 90 years ago. The rail break was not visually obvious, and when the freight train passed over it, the last three wagons derailed. The



safety message in this accident related to the inspection of rail infrastructure. If an inspection cannot test or can only partly test tracks, maintenance personnel must report the shortfall to highlight operational risk and the requirement for a timely supplementary examination.

In the marine mode, we released our report from the grounding of the Australian Border Force cutter Roebuck Bay on Henry Reef in the Great Barrier Reef in September 2017 (MO-2017-009). The vessel's route plan had been amended during the passage planning process, resulting in the route being inadvertently plotted across Henry Reef. The cutter's



electronic chart display and information system (ECDIS) identified the reef as a danger to the planned route. However, the vessel's officers did not identify the danger, either visually or using the ECDIS. The investigation highlighted that the safe and effective use of ECDIS as the primary means of navigation depends on the mariner being thoroughly familiar with the operation, functionality, capabilities and limitations of the specific equipment in use on board their vessel.

### **Safety Campaigns**

During the last 12 months we have led two significant safety campaigns: 'Don't Push It, Land It' and 'Don't Push It, Don't Go'. 'Don't Push It, Land It' is safety messaging that encourages all helicopter pilots, no matter their experience or the type of helicopter they fly, to make a precautionary landing if they experience a situation that just isn't right. 'Don't Push It, Don't Go' covers the dangers of pilots flying into cloud, fog or darkness with twenty-one people having been fatally injured in nine aircraft accidents in the past 10 years.

Over the past 12 months the ATSB has also sought to deliver its safety messaging further to the three modes it investigates through participating in industry conferences under the banners of 'Fly Safe', 'Rail Safe' and 'Sea Safe'.

### **Industry Education**

The ATSB is focused on ensuring its own people have the highest investigative capabilities and in educating others to achieve the same. If the public trusts that investigators, regulators and operators are identifying and managing safety risks, then there is confidence in safety of the transport system. A significant achievement that we recognise as realising this objective is the partnership entered into this year between the ATSB and RMIT University.

This partnership is part of a vision to create a centre of excellence in the field of accident investigation and transport safety in the Asia–Pacific region. Industries in Australia, throughout the Asia–Pacific and around the world are now able to obtain ATSB co-developed qualifications in transport safety investigation. The partnership expects to extend to offering a Master’s-level qualification, as well as facilitating transport safety related research.

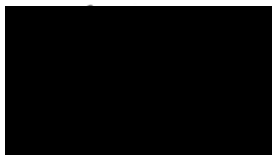
The first intake of students occurred on 1 July 2019 to study for a Graduate Certificate in Transport Safety Investigation. In 2020, a Graduate Diploma in Transport Safety Investigation will be offered before introducing a Master’s program. Students will gain access to the best insights into the fundamentals of accident investigation, from attending an accident scene and gathering evidence, through to identifying human and other factors that contributed to an accident, investigation analysis and technical report writing.

This course is not only available to ATSB investigators, but to industry personnel throughout South-east Asia and the South Pacific regions.

## **Conclusion**

The ATSB’s Audit and Risk Committee is tracking progress on our responses to the ANAO’s efficiency audit of the ATSB. Reporting also occurs through the ATSB’s Executive and to the Commission. The ATSB is maintaining its focus on quality, achieving safety outcomes through its investigative and other work. The ATSB is improving its operational efficiency with the objective of making the best use of all available resources for the public benefit.

Yours sincerely



Greg Hood  
Chief Commissioner and Chief Executive Officer