



6 March 2026

Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan
Chair, Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator

ACRRM Submission to the State of Aviation Sector Inquiry

The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) is pleased to provide this submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee's current inquiry: *The state of Australia's aviation sector and its ability to deliver reliable and affordable services to rural, regional and remote communities.*

ACRRM's vision is for *'Healthy rural, remote and First Nations communities through excellence, social accountability, and innovation'*. Key to this is access to doctors who are appropriately skilled to provide services in rural and remote communities. ACRRM plays an important role setting professional medical standards for training, assessment, certification and continuing professional development; and, providing quality education programs, innovative support, and strong representation for the dedicated doctors who serve our rural and remote communities. With this in mind, ACRRM provides comment to this inquiry particularly on Term of Reference d): *competitiveness of the aviation sector to service regional, rural and remote communities and the implications of reducing or withdrawing those services.*

Overall, ACRRM strongly encourages that the Committee takes a health lens into consideration of the challenges and recommendations of this inquiry to ensure adequate policy settings and regulations for sustainable, accessible and reliable airline travel for rural, regional and remote areas. While Australia enjoys some of the best healthcare in the world and a guarantee for universal access to healthcare through the Medicare system, this can only be realised if people are able to access the care they need, from an appropriately trained and available workforce in the right place at the right time.

As well-recognised through the Aviation White Paper process, *"Safe, affordable and reliable air services are vital for regional and remote Australia, connecting people to family, community, and the services they need to maintain and improve their standard of living"* (Aviation White Paper, p.108) and that *"Access to aviation is vital for the health, social and economic wellbeing of remote communities, particularly to support Closing the Gap targets related to improving education, health and employment outcomes"* (p.109).

However, as recently identified by the Regional Australia Institute in the 2025 Regional Ambition Progress Report, *“Air services are vital to life in regional communities yet despite population growth, there are fewer regional airlines operating today than 20 years ago”*. For example, Regional Capitals Australia noted through the Aviation White Paper process that in 2023, Regional Express Airlines (Rex) reduced services on 16 routes and suspended 4 other routes; Qantas cancelled services from Exmouth, Burnie, Davenport and Alice Springs; and less than six months after launching, Bonza cancelled services on five regional routes while reducing services on a range of other regional routes. ACRRM members report that the scale of disrupted and unreliable air travel in so many rural and remote locations has even resulted in widespread local vocabulary referencing relevant airlines to colloquially describe this problematic trend.

Cancellation of flights to and from rural and remote areas at the rates described above significantly and detrimentally impacts the availability of critical healthcare services for people in these communities, who already experience poorer health outcomes compared with those living in metropolitan areas.

ACRRM members report experience from the unreliability of aviation services in rural and remote areas which not only results in large numbers of patients missing appointments at tertiary health services that are often hundreds of kilometres away or choosing not to attend when resulting drive times become unrealistic, but also workforce impacts for visiting specialists.

There is the reliance on a fly-in fly-out workforce for health and related services in many rural and particularly remote areas, which is contingent on both appropriate airstrips and airports, and often also the availability of commercial airline flights. For example, in many rural locations hospital services are reliant on some clinicians who do not live locally. This might include intensivists or surgeons. In these cases, without reliable air travel, there can be significant gaps in services in areas such as High Dependency Units which then must be covered by clinical staff from other areas, such as Emergency Departments. ACRRM members also note the significant impacts for regions when airline routes are decreased or cancelled, impacting the ability of people in these areas to travel to major cities or see visiting specialists, with waiting times blowing out to 18 months or more.

Reliable and affordable air travel is also critical for the rural health workforce for reaching metropolitan areas for personal and family reasons. While there are significant attractions, rural practice can have elements of isolation. The ability to easily travel to other places and cities where family and friends live is important for a sustainable workforce. Additionally, rural practitioners are regularly required to travel to major centres to access and attend ongoing training and professional development activities.

A well-functioning, robust and reliable regional aviation sector is also vital for ensuring the transportation of goods to rural and remote areas. This includes critical medical and pharmaceutical supplies such as medications, first aid supplies or other clinical items. Given the geographic distances between major cities and many rural and remote areas, and the regular inaccessibility of some remote communities by road for up to months at a time due to seasonal weather, ensuring

these supplies can be provided in a timely manner to where they are needed relies on the aviation sector.

Lastly, contributions to the Aviation White Paper process demonstrated a clear view that “*regional aviation is increasingly not adequately serving the community’s needs, with high prices and limited services*” (AWP p. 112). ACRRM recognises the per passenger cost of regional travel works out to be much higher, indeed, this was reflected in the White Paper finding that “*the average ticket price per kilometre was 52% higher for return flights to or from a non-capital city than return flights between 2 capital cities*” (in September 2023; p. 110). As has also been well-acknowledged, the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on the aviation sector, which continues to face challenges, particularly for rural airports and routes.

However, the need for accessibility and affordability remains critical. As such, ACRRM welcomes the progress of the Aviation White Paper recommendation for an inquiry by the Productivity Commission into the determinants of regional airfares (referred in October 2025). As for this Senate inquiry, it is strongly encouraged that the Productivity Commission inquiry take a health lens into considerations to ensure targeted support that is right for the regional aviation sector to ensure accessibility to healthcare services for rural and remote communities. ACRRM is pleased that the Productivity Commission is travelling to rural communities for their inquiry and have already heard some of the impacts of limited regional aviation services on the health of people in these locations (see [ABC News report, 2 March 2026](#)).

ACRRM notes that ongoing support and action from the Australian Government is required now and into the future to better support the regional aviation sector. Relevant recommendations from the Aviation White Paper process include assured and further support for rurally focused grants programs (e.g. the Regional Airports Program and the Remote Airstrips Upgrade Program) and longer-term future planning to increase and ensure regional connectivity, akin to planning for road transport. ACRRM encourages that consideration of these and other recommendations from the White Paper and similar recent processes are progressed to tangible, rurally targeted action that recognises the importance of a strong, sustainable regional aviation sector to enable critical healthcare for rural and remote Australians.

If you have any queries relating to this feedback, please contact ACRRM at policy@acrrm.org.au.

Yours sincerely



Marita Cowie AM
Chief Executive Officer