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The Secretary,
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport & Regional Services,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600.

Submission to

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport and Regional Services re
Commercial Regional Aviation Services in Australia, and alternative transport links to major populated islands.

Air transport has been recognised for its ability to cut down on the tyranny of distance suffered by all who live outside the state capital cities in Australia. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the formation of the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS).

My electorate covers most of Eyre Peninsula – an area about the size of Tasmania. Four principal considerations surface regularly both in contacts to my offices and in my own view:

1. Reduction of services.

Over the last couple of years or so, services to country towns have gradually reduced until now only two centres – Port Lincoln and Ceduna – have regular commercial air services to the capital, Adelaide. It can take longer for someone to drive from their home to either of these centres than for the air journey involved, while the bus journey to the capital city of Adelaide takes up to 16 hours one way (barring hold ups). For those who are ill, or for whom time is of the essence, this is an impossible situation. Bus and taxi services are not a viable option in most cases.

2. Cost

Port Lincoln is the busiest regional airport in South Australia and one of the busiest in Australia however services to regional towns are traditionally expensive. It costs proportionally more to fly Port Lincoln-Adelaide than Adelaide-Sydney or Adelaide-Melbourne. These costs impact on families who find it impossible for tertiary and secondary students to come home for short periods. It would be interesting to compare the costs for families who live in the city and country families who virtually have to set up a second home in the

city for their children. In addition, to outlay over \$300 (a return trip from Port Lincoln to Adelaide costs \$364 flying with Kendell Airlines and \$302 flying with Airlines of South Australia, while prices to other centres are higher still) just on an air fare to come home for a long weekend is impossible. The bus while cheaper takes up most of the weekend in travelling time and recovery.

Another area where cost impacts severely is for country trainees and apprentices who have to travel to Adelaide for training. Some have been known to discontinue their apprenticeship on these grounds alone. The high air fare is only one of the costs.

3. Social justice

The difficulty for rural residents in accessing services, education, medical facilities and training is a matter of social justice. Rural residents have a substantially lower average per capita income than in the cities. Farmers have an average annual farm income of \$27,310 compared with the Australian average of \$38,740 (Margaret Alston, associate professor at Charles Sturt University). When those on benefits are also included, the average income of country families drops even more dramatically.

Visits between elderly and/or disabled family members are impossible in some circumstances due to their inability to cope with the long bus travel or private vehicle travel involved when air travel is unavailable.

4. Safety

Viable air services are a safety measure that should be accessible to rural and regional residents, as well as another group who are often forgotten – tourists and travellers. Regular services ensure that airstrips are maintained in usable condition. The RFDS and charters require airstrips on which to land and take off. In fact, sections of the Eyre Highway that goes across the top of Eyre Peninsula and across the Nullarbor Plain to Western Australia have been adapted for use as emergency landing strips.

Patients transferred to Adelaide by air ambulance are usually sent home (or back to their local hospital) once the crisis has passed. When a person is as ill and/or weak as this, the plane is the only way to travel but is unaffordable to some, especially older people on pensions. PAT's helps but is not always available as there are very strict eligibility criteria.

The residents of Elliston, a small regional centre in my electorate, campaigned for an airport some years ago after a young mother died in childbirth through the inability to access appropriate medical aid. A \$50,000 grant from the State Government was augmented with many hours of voluntary service and free use of equipment to build and light an airstrip.

5. Charter services

Charter services on Eyre Peninsula are limited (only two operators remaining) due to declining profitability mainly caused by high landing fees in Adelaide and increasing insurance costs.

Some suggestions to assist regional airlines and charter operators are:

- Reviewing any fuel taxes for planes on regional services.
- Researching other costs and expenses which naturally are reflected in the cost of tickets.
- Grants to local government bodies for the maintenance of airports.
- Reviewing the conditions pertaining to charter services to make it easier for these to operate profitably.
- Reviewing the conditions applying to private pilots/owners of planes to make it possible for them to be used in emergencies.
- Ensuring the financial viability of the RFDS.
- Subsidise non-viable or marginally viable routes where necessary by funding passenger numbers over a period to reach a viable level of operation or for social justice reasons. This should leave incentive for the operator to still increase patronage.

I congratulate the committee on holding this inquiry. I urge the committee to bring forward recommendations that will enable rural and regional residents in Australia access to the safety and convenience of air travel at an affordable cost.

Yours sincerely,



Mrs. Liz Penfold MP