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MEMBER ASSOCIATION REPORT TO IFATCA ASIA PACIFIC REGIONAL MEETING

Civil Air Operations Officers' Association of Australia

New Delhi – October 19 – 22, 2012

Thank you to our hosts of the IFATCA Asia Pacific Regional Meeting, 2012, the ATC Guild (India). Hosting of these meetings is a big undertaking and the effort is appreciated. I am sure that we will all look back upon our time in this exciting city very fondly.

Traffic Levels

As with everything aviation, ATC in Australia is in a constant state of change adapting to new technologies and changes to traffic levels and complexities. In Australia, particularly Western Australia and Northern Queensland the increase in mining activities has led to major increases in traffic with mine operations employing many staff on a "fly in, fly out" basis. As such Thursdays, the major shift change over day for these operations, has become very busy. This is not only impacting the regional airspaces under which the mines are located, but also in Perth and Brisbane airports, the hubs for mining staff in transit. Whilst the introduction of ADSB in Western Australia has meant the night shifts, with predominately international aircraft, now closely resembles radar, the majority of domestic aircraft during daytime do not have the equipment fitted and require procedural separation. This requires the controllers working this airspace to remain competent in a large amount of separation standards, procedures and techniques.

Working Conditions

The Australian Air Traffic Control and Supporting Air Traffic Services Collective Agreement, our work contract stating our pay scales and most of our working conditions, is due to expire on November 30 this year. In an attempt to alleviate the industrial angst and delays that have been experienced in the past, Airservices Australia, our employer, made an approach in November last year with the offer of ostensibly a rollover agreement for a suitable pay increase. Whilst predominately this meant that conditions would remain the same, there were still some things to be negotiated and the meetings were often cut short due to the availability of negotiators, mainly from the employers' side, due to other commitments. "In principle" agreement was reached on August 30 and there has been extensive briefings given to all staff covered by the agreement throughout September. It is hoped that a vote for the agreement can be achieved in time for there to be a seamless changeover on November 31, with the first pay increase of the new agreement to take effect from December 1. Of course, it is still possible that the staff will vote "No" to the proposal, which would mean we have extensive negotiations ahead of us. My personal belief is that this will not happen and the agreement will be voted up.

Fatigue Management

Over the last 12 months our employer has implemented a new fatigue risk management system, FRMS2. Civil Air had long argued that the previous system was mismanaged in that fatigue was given a score based on certain parameters and that rather than being used to address fatigue, managers managed the number, the result being that you could get the system to give you any number if you asked or phrased the question a certain way or cut a little off the end of the shift.

FRMS2 attempts to address fatigue by limiting shift cycles and runs of shifts. No shift in a run can start more than 3 hours prior to the start time of any other shift in the cycle. This has had a major impact in many areas of the organisation in that many areas now roster blocks of morning and afternoon shifts together in order to comply with the fatigue policy. Whilst the fatigue system indicates that it would be fatiguing to have a run of starts at 14, 13, 12 and 10 it has no problem with a run of shifts starting at 06, 06, 05:30 and 05. Apart from feeling tired from multiple morning starts

staff are reporting a major impact on work life balance. Where before they would work afternoon, afternoon, morning, morning, day off, day off, a run of four afternoon shifts has meant that many are not getting to spend any quality time with family. Additionally the late finish on one run followed by the early start on the next run has had a huge impact on the time away from work and the nights available to schedule activities away from work. Where previously staff would finish on a morning and have 3 clear nights off before returning on an afternoon, they now often finish on an evening shift, have one clear night off and then need an early night to prepare to return on a morning.

The policy has been implemented to all staff in the ATC and supporting services area, regardless of whether that area works night shifts and includes both operational and non-operational staff. In terms of negative impact, the introduction of this policy has been the single most deleterious to staff on a large scale in my 23 years as an employee. It is not only having a negative affect on the operational staff but additionally management are finding the decreased flexibility for a staff shift replacements is having a negative impact. There is a post implementation review (PIR) scheduled soon and it is hoped that some changes can be achieved.

Staffing Levels

A constant theme in the reports from Australia for some years now has been the lack of staff. Despite constant denials from the employer that they have enough staff, that they are just in the wrong places, Airservices is still yet to identify where that place is or to get any movement of staff into those areas that are short. They position is that there are 2 different staffing levels, core and mature. The first is the bare minimum to actually have the staff to run the place whilst the mature level is what is required in order to achieve all mandated training, leave (including long service leave) and project work.

My view is the “core staffing” is actually a staff shortage as it does not allow for all leave to be acquitted nor for all mandated or across rating training. It does not allow for staff movement within the system allowing career development. These things are not nice to have, but requirements of a professional and correctly staffed ANSP. “Mature staffing” is actually correct or sufficient staffing as it allows for a fully functioning system and enables all other tasks to be completed.

It is interesting to note that in 2007 the then CEO of Airservices, in a presentation to staff, noted that there was a staff shortage at the time and that the system functioned on an over reliance of overtime. Little seems to have changed in this regard in the last 5 years.

Currently there is a strong recruitment drive in order to employ and train ab-initio trainees. Unfortunately the age profile for current employees is such that many are able to retire in the next few years and the influx of ab-initio's may struggle to keep up with attrition and is unlikely to make a noticeable dent to the current shortage. There have been rumours lately that Airservices is looking to employ controllers based in Eurocontrol, enabled by the economic downturn in Europe, on short tem contract of up to 3 years, although this is yet to be confirmed.

New Towers

Staffing levels, or the lack there of, have been exacerbated by the need to open 2 new towers in the last 18 months with a third to be opened by November next year. The increase in traffic to staff the increase in mining operations has meant that traffic levels in some areas already have or are approaching the trigger point for a tower service being required. This has meant that our employer has not only had to contend with a shortage with current staff requirements but is required by the regulator to come up with the staff for these extra towers. In addition to that there is a tower upgrade going on at many aerodromes over the next couple of years as some of the towers we now staff have been in existence since the 50's. In order to bring the operating systems up to date, and because many of these towers have asbestos, it has been deemed prudent to build a new tower rather then refurbish existing facilities. Of course, new towers with new operating systems require training, placing further stressors on the staffing situation.

Having been involved in IFATCA for some years as a delegate and Committee of Management member representing Civil Air, I realise that the message in this area is all too familiar. Hopefully I will be able to report differently in the near future.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Daryl Hickey', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Daryl Hickey
President
Civil Air

October 22, 2012