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Aviation Action Plan released: Changes for Ōhakea, regional airlines, aim to speed up new drone rules

**John Weekes**

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The Government today announced more than 20 new steps to address an aviation skills crisis and grow the sector.

Ōhakea will be made permanently available for large passenger jets and rules on drones will be reworked.

Associate Minister of Transport James Meager released the Aviation Action Plan today.

The plan also aimed to help the country's regional airlines.

The bipartisan Interim Aviation Council, which will soon be replaced by a permanent Aviation Council, developed the plan.

The permanent council will report to the minister annually on progress.

The plan will be refreshed and reviewed every three years.

The minister is addressing the [Aviation Industry Association \(AIANZ\) annual conference](#) today.

The industry group, which represents the commercial aviation industry, welcomed the new plan.

It said the plan provided a long-awaited, clear and collaborative pathway to industry growth and transformation.

Rapid technological change, high costs and global supply chain issues have been acknowledged in the plan.

AIANZ chief executive Simon Wallace said the plan acknowledged the association's core concerns about skills, regulations and infrastructure.

"Especially encouraging is the promise of policy change to address systemic issues with pilot training that are contributing to pilot shortages," Wallace added.

"We hope this will lead to lifting the outdated student loan cap that is the main barrier to aspiring young New Zealanders entering the workforce, as they are unable to borrow to cover their tuition fees."

Cheaper airfares?

The plan released today said the sector had always been dynamic, searching for new profitable routes while managing the challenges of flying to and within a distant, small market.

It added: "Sector participants have raised concerns about the rising costs of doing business in New Zealand."

Apart from fee and levy increases, airlines reported higher maintenance costs from issues with engines and parts supplies and the global aircraft shortage.

Finding a way to secure cheap domestic airfares has been a conundrum, the plan seemed to acknowledge.

"New Zealand communities expect a lot from the aviation sector in terms of affordable connectivity, which is increasingly challenging to provide under the circumstances outlined."

But the plan said everyone in the sector could work together to develop efficiencies.

The ministry and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) must by the end of this year develop a "prioritised rolling rule-making programme" to improve efficiency and safety, and enable innovation.

"The current civil aviation rules are not always as flexible as they could be," a companion document to the plan added.

Jobs

The plan would update the pilot qualification, in consultation with the sector and especially airlines, by the end of this year.

It also aimed to develop options to address [challenges in workforce training and retention](#), again by the end of this year.

It would also identify projected skillset needs for the next 10 years.

And it aimed to make aviation a more desirable sector to work in, addressing high attrition rates and under-representation of Māori and women.

Regional airlines

The Regional Infrastructure Fund will support [regional airlines](#) with acquisition or lease of aircraft, procuring essential components and some debt refinancing.

Travellers may also get used to the term “interlining”.

That basically meant allowing airlines to sell services provided by another airline.

The plan said the ministry and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) would work to enable interlining between Air New Zealand and regional players.

“This isn’t a programme to bail out airlines,” Meager said this morning.

“It’s about saying regional connectivity is important to New Zealand.”

Air Force

The paper said to ensure New Zealand was open for business at all times, Ōhakea will be made available on a permanent basis as an alternate runway for widebody aircraft.

That change for the base near Palmerston North will be done by December 2026.

Ōhakea’s main runway is the country’s third-longest at 2437m.

Civil Aviation Authority

The CAA would work with peer organisations overseas to adopt mutual recognition agreements for licensing systems, licences and the movement of aviation personnel.

The CAA has been told to replace paper-heavy processes with smarter, more accessible systems.

A CAA funding review is due by June 2027.

Disabled travellers

Under the plan, the Aviation Council will by early next year identify “quick wins” to improve air travel for disabled people.

Meager said the plan would also more broadly strengthen [passengers’ consumer rights](#).

Drones

The plan acknowledged how drones were increasingly used to monitor crop health and distribute fertiliser and pesticide.

Drones were used to inspect bridges and buildings for damage, reducing the need for dangerous manual inspection.

Meager said the plan would rework specific civil aviation rules for drones and uncrewed aircraft and reduce certification wait times.

Sustainable fuel

The ministry will work with industry to develop regional collaboration on [sustainable aviation fuel \(Saf\)](#) uptake and supply.

The plan urged the sector to reduce fossil fuel dependency and promote a clean energy transition, in line with the goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Air New Zealand

Air New Zealand will assess what it needed for fleet expansion, jet fuel demand and electricity for next generation aircraft, and convene with the energy sector to discuss those needs before the new year.

Airways NZ

The pricing framework for air traffic controllers Airways New Zealand will be reviewed.

Security

The ministry said it would work with the CAA and the Aviation Security Service to improve the system's operational efficiency while ensuring safety and security was not compromised.

'Milestone'

Meager added: "Aviation is vital to New Zealand's economic prosperity and our way of life."

He said the action plan represented a major sector milestone.

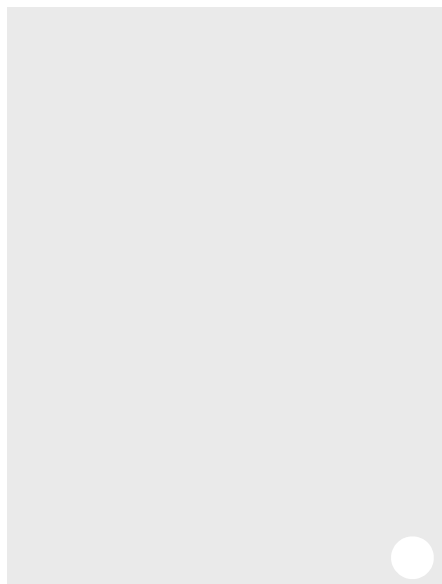
"It's a practical roadmap that tackles challenges facing aviation, including the need to embrace growth and innovation, and build a skilled and sustainable workforce."

Meager told the conference he was confident the aviation sector would be better off in six months than it was now.

John Weekes is a business journalist covering aviation. He has previously covered consumer affairs, crime, politics and courts.

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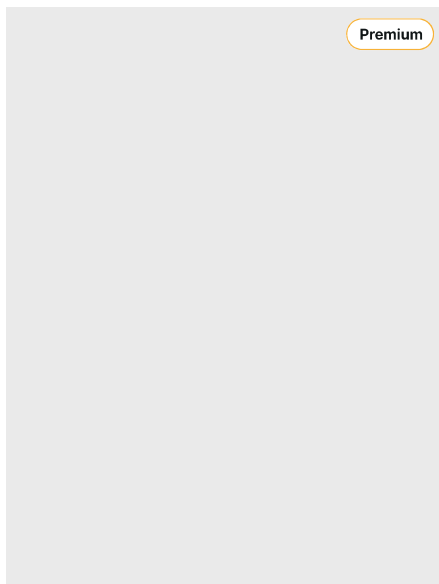
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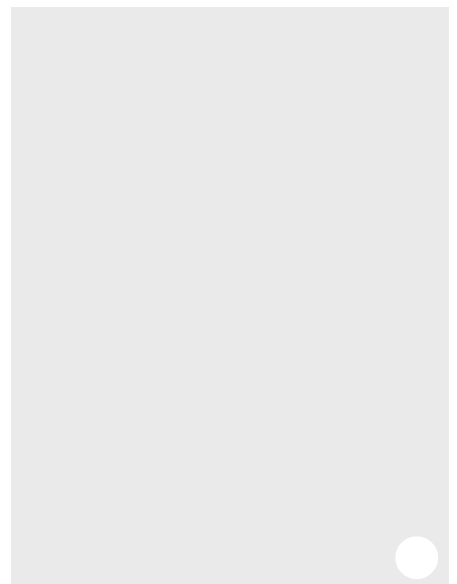


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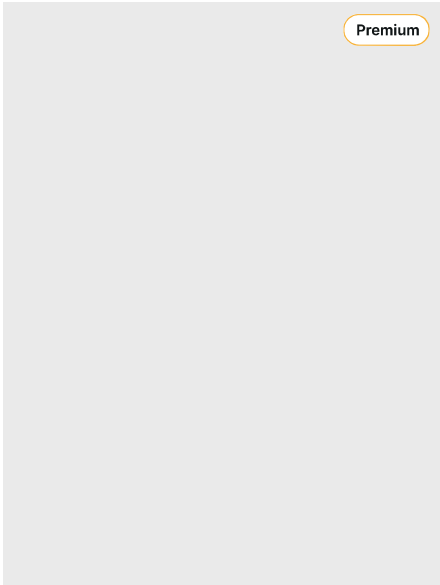
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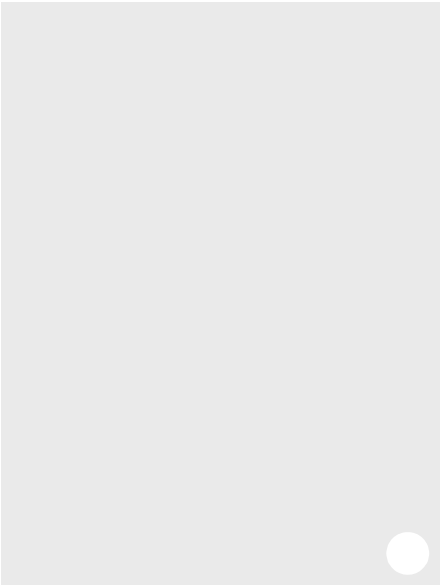


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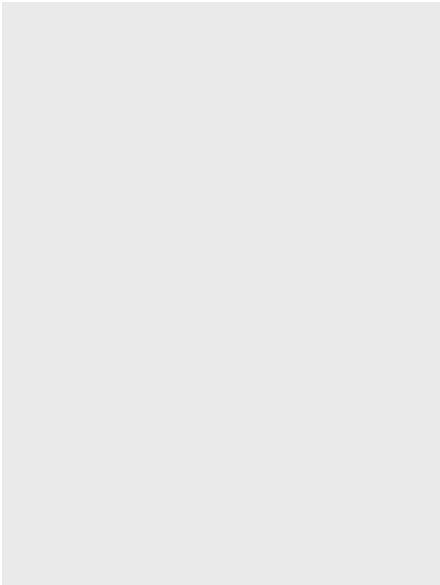
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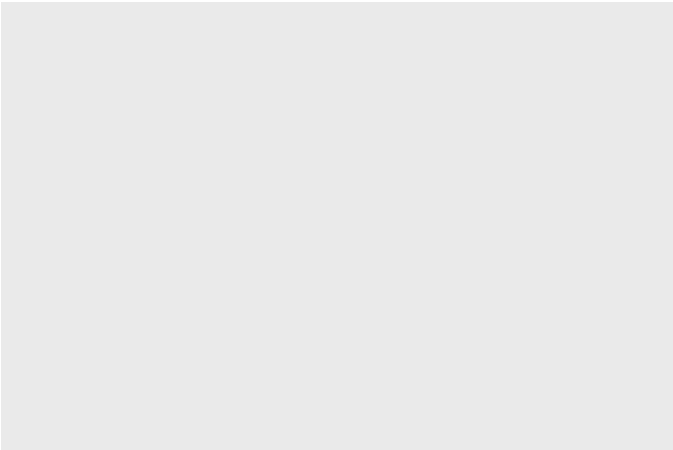
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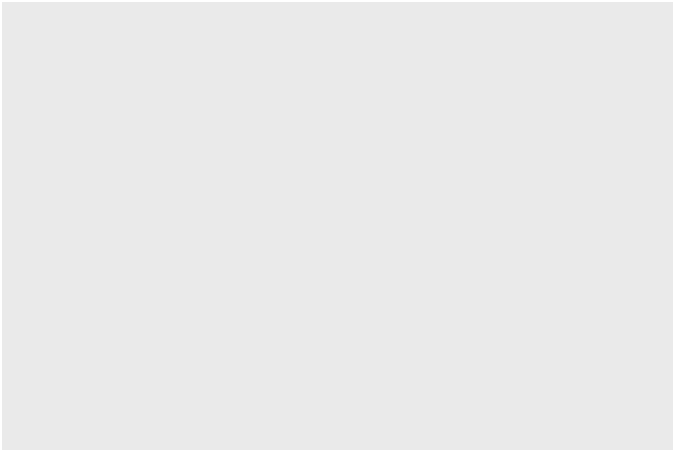
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