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Aviation White Paper

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## Aviation White Paper

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Thank you for the opportunity to make comment in response to the Aviation Green Paper released by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts. I make the following submission as a leader of the Liya-Dhalinymirr clan of the Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land, and as an independent Member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly representing the Electorate of Mulka in North East Arnhem Land.

The cost of living in remote areas of the Northern Territory is very high. Food, fuel, mechanical repairs and household goods all cost significantly more than in large towns or cities. Travel is also much more expensive in comparison to urban areas. Many families cannot afford to travel, and many businesses cannot afford to absorb these extra costs. Table 1 outlines approximate flight costs between major communities and Darwin as a snapshot of prices at one time. Table 2 provides flight costs from one community (Milingimbi) to the surrounding communities and homelands, and provides an example of flight costs for travel within the region. While the community of Milingimbi is an island and some people may travel by boat or car (there is a regular car barge that is very expensive), many people rely on air travel to travel to/from Milingimbi. This is normal for most communities across the region. The main service town for the region is Nhulunbuy where there is a hospital, bank, aged-care facility, Aboriginal hostel, crisis accommodation, shops and businesses, and government and non-government services. Many people in the region travel to Nhulunbuy for services and supplies, often multiple times per week.

### **Travel in the region**

For Yolngu living in the region there is often a large amount of travel between communities for ceremonies, funerals, family passing away, health issues, shopping and access to services e.g. Centrelink. Much of this travel is not able to be planned for in advance and happens in the moment. Additionally, people regularly need to travel to Darwin for health issues, or to care for someone with health issues or because someone is passing away.

Often people get stuck in Darwin, waiting for enough money to be able to book a return flight or waiting for a car that may be returning to community. This creates numerous safety issues, for example, does the person have somewhere safe to stay in Darwin? There are many people long grassing (sleeping rough) in Darwin while waiting to return to their community.

For many balanda (non-Yolŋu) people in the region, travel is a necessity to connect with family living elsewhere or for holidays. Balanda people may also need to travel for more urgent matters such as health issues, family crises, funerals etc. Additionally, many people travel to/from and within the region for work purposes, and the high costs of air travel can have significant impacts on businesses and organisations capacity to work in the region.

Travel to and from the region is also an integral part of tourism, and if there is to be a sustainable tourism industry it is imperative that air travel is more accessible. Nhulunbuy, the main service town for the region, is undergoing a transition period as the mining industry winds down and tourism is a potential key industry for the future of the town.

As a remote region many supplies are required to be air freighted increasing the cost of living for the region. There is concern about losing good professionals in areas such as health, education, and other essential services due to the prohibitive cost of travel and high costs of living.

#### **Existing aviation initiatives in the region**

Airnorth have created a local fare deal for residents of Gove - this allows people to get a cheaper flight if they are booking four weeks in advance and reside in the Gove region. This deal is not available on all flights, and requires a level of administration that may be inaccessible to ESL speakers with low English and/or digital literacy. Additionally, for anyone flying for an urgent situation, booking a month in advance is not possible. Consequently some of the poorest members of our communities, or those who are required to travel urgently for health or compassionate reasons are unable to access this scheme and see no relief for air fares. Additionally, this scheme is not available for people living in any of the major communities or homelands outside of the Gove Peninsula region.

Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) run a daily Regular Passenger Transport (RPT) service between the major communities in the East Arnhem Region. While significantly cheaper than a charter flight, the cost of the RPT can still be prohibitive for many residents. Much of the intra-regional travel is between smaller homeland towns, and it is not financially viable for MAF to run an RPT service between all of these locations. This means that there is no option for people besides expensive charter flights or driving hundreds of kilometres on poor quality roads to access services and shops. I understand that MAF have a pending application for the Federal Government Remote Air Services Subsidies Scheme (RASS) to establish an RPT service between some of the larger homeland towns which will have considerable benefit for these communities if approved.

Many people are required to travel regularly between homeland towns, major communities and Nhulunbuy, for work and other purposes and for 6-7 months of the year many of the roads are impassable due to rain, or are degraded by weather damage and heavy vehicle damage meaning overland travel is not always feasible, or can be lengthy and dangerous.

Whilst the bigger communities are serviced by either Airnorth or Fly Tiwi (or both), the lack of competition and necessity of travel (as outlined above), means that these operators do not need to be concerned with providing high quality customer service and can set their prices without market pressure.

### **Recommendations**

A Productivity Commission inquiry into the determinants of Airfares for Regional and remote Communities would be very welcome in this region. As per the recommendations from the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee in 2019, it would be beneficial in this region for this inquiry “...to investigate the feasibility of increasing operational subsidies and introducing other price control alternatives to address the high cost of regional airfares. The inquiry should consult with regional communities to determine whether additional routes should be subject to regulation. The Productivity Commission should use its compulsory information-gathering powers to inform its investigations. Additionally, as outlined in the Committee’s report, it would be beneficial to this region to include investigations into the social and economic impacts of air route supply and airfare pricing on rural, regional and remote Australia.”

I am also aware that there are significant issues with workforce shortages in the aviation industry. Pilot shortage across the country are most keenly felt in remote and regional areas as newly trained regional pilots and specialist staff are often poached by bigger companies. To create a more sustainable workforce I believe that local recruitment and training of local pilots could be the solution. As the first Yolŋu pilot in North East Arnhem Land I want to encourage and create a pathway for young people in our communities to become pilots. We need local training for local jobs so that the people living in the remote and regional communities can fill the jobs and work close to home. I have encouraged MAF and Airnorth to consider training locally, however I believe support from the NT and Commonwealth Governments is also required to make this possible.

I’d like to thank the committee for their consideration of remote and regional issues. The outcomes from such scrutiny will hopefully provide relief and bring benefit for all the people who live in our remote communities.

Yours Sincerely,



Yinjiya Guyula MLA

**Table 1**

**Flight costs between major East Arnhem communities and Darwin (November 2023)**

<b>Towns</b>	<b>Approx pop.</b>	<b>Airlines that connect to Darwin</b>	<b>Cost of flights in the next week to Darwin (one way)</b>
Nhulunbuy (Gove)	3200	Airnorth	\$900
Other Gove communities	1000	Airnorth	\$900
Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island)	2200	Airnorth Fly Tiwi	\$400-\$700 \$650
Milingimbi	1000	Airnorth Fly Tiwi	\$480-\$620 \$650
Ramingining	800	Fly Tiwi	\$650
Gapuwiyak (Lake Evella)	700	Fly Tiwi	\$650

**Attachment 2**

**Charter flight costs between Milingimbi and homeland towns (June 2023)**

<b>from Milingimbi</b>	<b>Marthakal Air</b>		<b>MAF</b>		<b>Air Frontier</b>
	<i>Single Engine One-way</i>	<i>Twin One-way</i>	<i>Charter-single engine One-way</i>	<i>RPT</i>	Single engine - One-way
to Elcho Island	\$730	\$850	\$1835	\$220	\$1000
to Ramingining	\$910	\$1020	\$1870	\$110	\$700
to Mapuru	\$840	\$990	\$1780		\$950
to Gove	\$1700	\$1960	\$1690	\$380	\$1750
to Mata Mata	\$1280	\$1480	\$1780		\$1400
to Gikal	\$1280	\$1480	\$1780		\$1400
to Nyinyikay	\$1260	\$1450	\$1770		\$1400
to Rorriwuy	\$1260	\$1450	\$1770		\$1400
to Gan Gan	\$1440	\$1660	\$2035		\$1400
to Garthalala	\$1620	\$1860	\$1940		\$1650
to Baniyala	\$1640	\$1880	\$2140		\$1600
to Birany Birany	\$1620	\$1860	\$1940		\$1650
to Dhalinybuy	\$1440	\$1660	\$2035		\$1400
to Gurrumuru	\$1460	\$1680	\$2035		\$1400
to Yathalamara	\$910	\$1020	\$1870		\$700