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Regional 'bloodbath'

TAREE appears to have escaped relatively unscathed from the latest suspension of Rex airline services across the eastern states, however its chief pilot is predicting a 'bloodbath' among regional airline operators in the coming months.

The 'painful decisions' made in recent times to axe several services indicate a troubled aviation industry running desperately low on skilled pilots, Rex chief pilot Chris Hine said.

"I foresee many regional operators not making it through 2008."

His warnings have been backed up by Warrick Lodge, Rex general manager of network strategy and sales, who said the severity of the current pilot shortage had prompted Rex to make the painful decisions it has, in order to preserve the integrity of its larger network.

Regional Express (Rex) announced it will suspend services between Melbourne and Griffith, effective on next Monday, as a direct result of the pilot shortage that the airline – and Australian aviation industry as a whole – currently faces.

The suspension of the Melbourne to Griffith route will have flow-on effects for other Griffith flights, with a reduction in the frequency of Rex services between Sydney and Griffith expected.

At the same time, the company also announced a postponement of the Maryborough to Brisbane route. This service, suspended last November, was due to recommence on March 16 but will now recommence in September at the earliest.

As a consequence of the severe pilot shortage, services between Sydney and Cooma, originally scheduled to recommence on May 19, will now resume on June 6.

Chief pilot Chris Hine said, "No airline in the world can withstand a 60 per cent annual attrition rate of its pilot strength without catastrophic damage.

The fact that Rex has only suspended six per cent of its services is "a testimony to the dedication and sacrifices of our staff and the rapidity of management's response to this severe crisis," he said.

When it became evident that Rex was having trouble meeting route commitments last year, the airline announced it had started its own pilot school and the first batch of 16 cadets, handpicked from 1600 applicants, will graduate in July. "Thereafter we will have about 20 new pilots every three months, largely sheltering Rex from the massive recruitment of our trained pilots by the main airlines."

Mr Hine warned that the situation will get worse in the year ahead with all three major domestic carriers – Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Blue – set to embark on aggressive fleet expansion in addition to the start up of Tiger Airways.

"Not all regional airlines have Rex's ability to fund their own cadet program and flying academy," he said.

"I expect to see a bloodbath amongst the regional operators in the months ahead."

He warned that some of Taree's near neighbours (and competitors) including Port Macquarie and Newcastle, will face some tough decisions also.

“Even QantasLink will not be spared as evidenced by its recent reduction in services to ports such as Dubbo, Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie, Newcastle and Tamworth.”

Commenting on Rex’s latest suspension of services, Warwick Lodge the decision had been very difficult given the level of support Rex has received from Griffith City Council, Maryborough City Council and their broader local communities.

“Rex will go to great lengths to be committed to communities that support us and fully embrace the partnership approach,” he said.

“Unfortunately it is often the newest routes that understandably have the lowest passenger loads. We would normally have persevered two years to build up the new routes but given the severity of the pilot crisis, we do not have the luxury of time and we need to make the painful decision now in order to preserve the integrity of the larger network.”

Rex would like to return to these routes in the future, he added, but this remains largely subject to the pilot situation and the level of local support.

Passengers holding reservations on any suspended service should contact the Rex Customer Contact Centre on 131713 for a full refund.

Griffith to Melbourne passengers also have the option of transferring across to the Griffith to Sydney service