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MEDIA RELEASE

REX WARNS OF GRAVE CONSEQUENCES TO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA WITH NEW RULING ON PROFESSIONAL WORK VISA

Regional Express (Rex) has today warned the Federal Government that its new ruling on professional work visas will gravely affect essential air services to regional Australia.

On 18 April 2017 the Department of Immigration and Border Protection announced wide-ranging changes to the Australian immigration program, including abolition of the Temporary Work (skilled) visa (subclass 457), which is to be replaced with a new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa in March 2018. The changes see two occupations utilised by Rex completely removed from the official list of eligible occupations – Aeroplane Pilot and Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (Avionics). Two other occupations, Aircraft Maintenance Engineers (Airframe and Engine), are now only allowed short term visas and are ineligible for residency which will make them almost impossible to recruit from overseas. Without the ability to import these critical occupations, many smaller regional operators would not have survived up until now.

Rex Chief Operating Officer Neville Howell said, “Rex is the only major airline in Australia that established its own pilot academy simply to train new pilots for its airline. Despite seven years of effort and 20 completed intakes of cadet pilots, Rex is still obliged to recruit overseas as the rate of poaching, reflecting the shortage of pilots, by the larger carriers locally and abroad, is simply staggering.”

“As a small regional carrier, Rex has been forced to conduct expensive recruitment exercises in South Africa, the United States and Europe to bring in experienced Captains. In fact, Rex had scheduled a visit to London on 15 May 2017 just for this purpose before the news broke. It is no simple matter to bring in foreign pilots as they need to undergo extensive retraining and sit for CASA exams, but we simply have no choice as otherwise we will not have enough crew.”

“The removal of pilots and licensed engineers from the skills shortage list has been done without any aviation industry inputs besides the unions’. It is simply incredible that highly critical and scarce resources that require an enormous amount of specialised and high cost training have been removed when we see occupations like hairdressers, real estate agents, gardeners, florists, picture framers and footballers being left on the list.”

“If the government does not reverse its stand on this matter, Rex and other regional carriers will have no choice but to shut services to the more marginal regional centres in order to conserve their pilot resources for the bigger routes. The loss of connectivity to the capital cities for medical, educational and business links will undoubtedly tear apart the socio-economic fabric of many smaller regional cities and result in a terminal downward spiral of these cities.”

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“The Turnbull Government has shown enlightenment and courage in many of its initiatives but this particular one is mindless policy-making at its worst. Such policies-on-the-run are not worthy of the Coalition Government which is normally capable of much better initiatives, and are a disservice to the nation. We call upon the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection to place an immediate moratorium on the changes to the 457 visa program until a well-considered replacement list has been formulated reflecting the real needs of our economy.”

Regional Express (Rex) is Australia’s largest independent regional airline operating a fleet of more than 50 Saab 340 aircraft on some 1,500 weekly flights to 58 destinations throughout all states in Australia. In addition to the regional airline Regional Express, the **Rex Group** comprises wholly owned subsidiaries **Pel-Air Aviation** (air freight and charter operator), **Air Link** (Dubbo-based regional airline) and the **Australian Airline Pilot Academy**.

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