

Source: Eden Magnet, 3 Jan 08.

Pilot shortage hits home

By Sarah Chenhall

The ongoing pilot shortage hit home for Far South Coast residents just before Christmas, with the cancellation of flights in and out of Merimbula Airport.

The cancelled flights to Merimbula airport from Sydney on December 22 and Melbourne on December 23 were caused by "crew related and unplanned events" said a spokesperson for regional Express.

"When crew become unavailable for these flights, cancellations occurred as the reserve pilot list was exhausted," regional Express spokesperson Danielle Ross said last week.

Eden resident and fortnightly flyer John Hillier said he and many others would be devastated if Regional Express (Rex) the largest independent airline in Australia, was forced to continue cancelling flights to Merimbula because of pilot shortages.

Mr Hillier wasn't due to fly either of those days but has been delayed by bad weather twice recently.

He didn't mind the delay from Sydney on Friday, December 21 as he said he'd rather be safe than sorry.

Getting home later was no problem as he got a ride with Eden resident Dave Ward, whose daughter Holly had been on the same flight.

"I've never had a flight cancelled," he said.

"You can't fault Rex and they are very professional in what they do.

"I'm flying next after the Australia Day long weekend and I'll book next week to make sure I get a seat."

Rex chief of staff Jim Davies said he saw the pilot shortage coming back in October and has called on other airlines to introduce training programs.

As of December 12, Rex is leading the way with 17 students training in the company's first pilot cadet program in Mangalore Airport, Victoria, he said.

In October, Mr Davies said that larger airlines were "poaching" pilots from training programs, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, general aviation and regional airlines.

"Over the last three months, more than 20% of our pilots have been poached by Virgin, Jetstar, and Qantas and I am sure the situation is similar or worse in the other regional carriers," Mr Davies.

In an effort to reduce disruptions to regional flights to places like Merimbula, Rex has temporarily suspended services between Maryborough and Brisbane and Cooma and Sydney until at least March this year.

"The cancellation rate is continually improving, however with 15% of our pilots still joining ranks over the next couple of months we are still working to return to our historically superior performance levels," Miss Ross said.