hurt tourism, industry group warns



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An airline industry group says restrictions on air traffic in Queenstown could damage tourism this summer.

But air traffic controllers Airways NZ said capacity management aimed to fix uneven and sometimes excess capacity in Queenstown airspace.

James Stokes, Glenorchy Air chief executive and pilot, said the limit of 38 movements per hour was well below what the airport had handled in the past.

Limits were expected to apply for six weeks over summer and potentially two weeks in winter.

“In the past, movements have peaked at 80 an hour,” Stokes said.

“We’re happy to talk about where the appropriate limit is but we don’t think it’s less than half of the peak.

“We’ve been negotiating with Airways to help manage things better.”

He said operators engaged with the air traffic control agency in good faith.

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“They have decided that 38 is the safe [number]. That was not a negotiation.”

Aviation Industry Association (AIANZ) chief executive Simon Wallace said two movements in this context meant one aircraft arriving and departing within a one-hour timeframe.

“This cap of 38 applies to jet aircraft, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, so the cap is very restrictive when applied to all these operators collectively.”

He said during one busy week last month, Queenstown operated safely with up to 55 movements per hour.

Wallace said Airways decided “in a carte blanche manner” to cap movements at 38 per hour.

“The commercial aviation industry pays Airways levies to fund its operations that include air traffic control, but it does not believe it is receiving a minimum level of service in reply.”

He said AIANZ members were concerned the restriction could reduce scenic and tourism flight availability, create delays, and limit operational flexibility.

He said operators were also concerned about the potential impact on Queenstown’s reputation as a top tourism destination.

The association said Airways NZ in late 2024 told Queenstown operators that some air traffic controller resignations created staffing shortages, which meant changes to traffic management were needed.

It said travel wholesalers and tourism partners were now expressing concern about the future reliability and availability of air services into Queenstown.

“The airspace in Queenstown is some of the most complex in New Zealand,” Ben Girard, Airways NZ general manager for air traffic services, said.

“Capacity management has been introduced as a result of safety concerns raised by an operator in 2023 and following engagement with the industry over the past three years to resolve the issue of uneven and at times excess capacity in Queenstown airspace.”

Girard said several changes were introduced to improve safety and reduce complexity, in the hope such changes would support sustainable capacity growth.

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“However, the increasing volumes in the region now make this a necessary change in order to maintain safety in the airspace.”

He said the capacity cap of 38 movements was based on controller workload, runway availability and safety analysis, as well as simulating different capacity within the current environment.

Girard said the methodology used for calculating controller workload was consistent with papers published by the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers’ Associations.

He said outside the six weeks in summer and potentially a fortnight in winter, traffic would be managed tactically, as levels did not usually exceed 38 movements per hour.

“The purpose is to even the traffic throughout the day, making the workload more predictable and ensuring controllers only handle a level of traffic they can control safely.”

Queenstown Airport chief of aviation and customer Todd Grace said the airport supported capacity management.

“[We] believe it will enhance New Zealand’s tourism reputation by making flying more reliable during Queenstown’s busiest periods.”

He said without effective co-ordination, general aviation passengers could experience lengthy delays and potentially miss connections with other activities, including Milford Sound cruises.

“Capacity management will give passengers greater certainty, while ensuring all operators have reasonable access to the airfield.

“It does not necessarily mean fewer flights, but flights may need to be spread more evenly across the day during peak periods.”

He said based on last summer’s activity, just over 1% of flights would have been affected by the proposed limit.

John Weekes is a business journalist covering aviation. He also has experience covering civil and criminal courts, consumer affairs, crime and politics.

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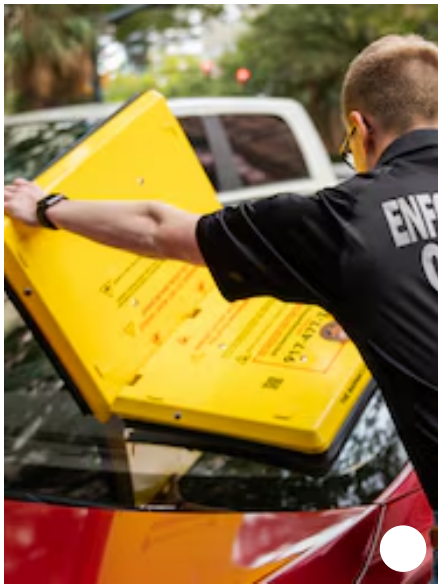

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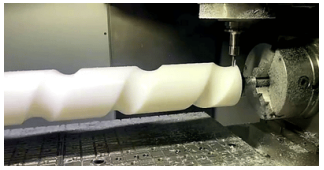

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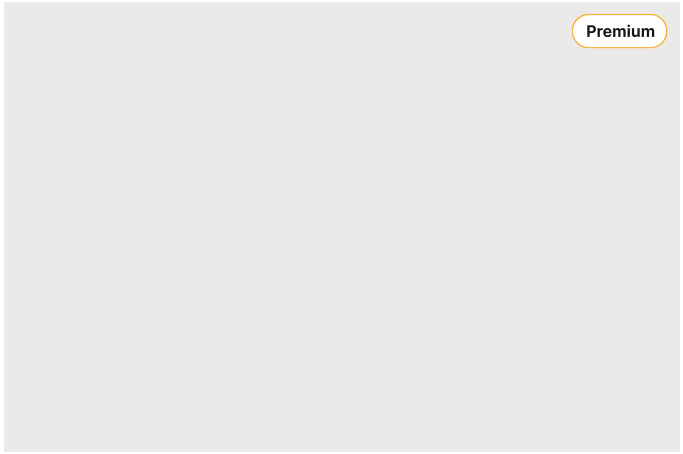

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