Understanding emergency services aircraft operations

Emergency services aircraft operations occur 24/7 across Australia to provide essential medical, fire fighting and police services to the community.

What are emergency services operations?

Emergency services operations describes fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter flights for:

- aeromedical services (air ambulance, medical evacuations, patient transport and urgent organ transport) e.g., the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS)
- fire fighting response and support
- search and rescue missions
- police air wing activities.

Emergency services operations may be noticeable to the community as they can operate in areas where flight paths and aircraft operations are not typical, and where they conduct 'unusual' activities such as repetitive circling and low-level flying.

Why are they different?

Emergency services operations are usually conducted at short notice and can occur at any time of the day or night.

They typically follow standard flight paths at the airport where they are departing from or arriving to, however, there may be times where the pilot flies the shortest distance directly to or from the airport.

Emergency services operations may take priority over other aircraft, and they may use a different runway to the runway being used at that time by regular aircraft. Aircraft in the vicinity may also be asked to 'hold' their current position (and circle or hover in the air) to allow the emergency services aircraft to quickly land or depart before them.

At airports without air traffic control services, the pilot of the emergency services aircraft will determine the most appropriate runway and flight route to use and will usually be given priority by other aircraft operating nearby.

airservices australia

How they operate

Fire fighting response helicopters (helitacs) or fixed-wing aircraft (water bombers) may fly close together when traveling to or from an incident site. Helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft can all operate together in the incident control area, but the helitacs and water bombers need to fly at low altitudes to conduct their water drops. These operations may also use the closest aerodrome for refuelling and refilling of water tanks throughout the incident response.

Aircraft involved in aerial surveillance or search and rescue operations can conduct repetitive circling or travel back and forth over an area, often at a lower altitude so the on-board personnel with surveillance and camera equipment have appropriate visibility.

Why do they fly so low?

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) determines how low aircraft, including helicopters, can fly. Except when they are landing or taking off, aircraft will generally be no lower than 1000ft (305m) over built-up areas, and 500ft (152m) over any other areas. However, emergency services aircraft are typically approved by CASA to operate at lower altitudes in certain situations.

Operations during curfew hours

Emergency aircraft are permitted to operate during curfew hours (11pm-6am) at Sydney, Adelaide, Gold Coast and Essendon Fields airports, which ensures timely responses to the emergencies or events requiring these types of flight operations.

Airservices Australia's WebTrak

Airservices' WebTrak is an online tool for viewing where aircraft fly: www.airservicesaustralia.com/community/environment/ aircraft-noise/webtrak

WebTrak (see graphic Figure 1) uses information from air traffic control secondary surveillance radars to display aircraft movements for 10 airports across Australia. Police and military movements are not shown on WebTrak due to the nature of these operations. Depending on the type of operation and class of airspace, some aircraft movements may not be conducted with active transponders or other radar surveillance equipment, and they will also not appear on the site.

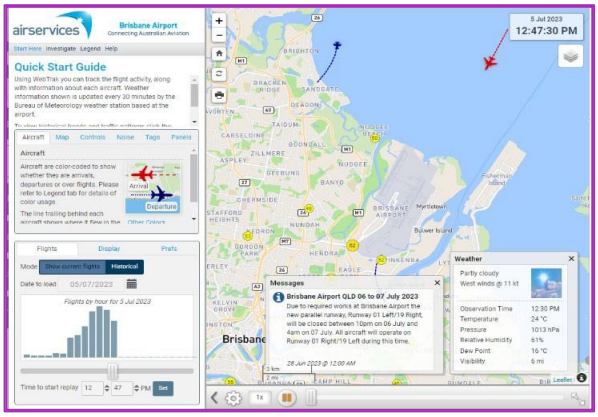

Figure 1: Airservices Australia's WebTrak displays aircraft movements for 10 airports across Australia

To find out more information:

To understand more about aircraft noise, visit:
https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/community/environment/aircraft-noise/

For information on aircraft operations or complaints contact our Noise Complaints and Information Service (NCIS) at:
https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/community/environment/aircraft-noise/about-making-a-complaint