

Lifting airport fog a winner

At first glance the proposed \$40 million to \$60 million redeveloped Cunderdin Airport as an alternative to Perth may seem a bit odd. But the more you look at Ascent Aviation's plans, the more they appeal.

Aviation fuel is at the heart of the business case for the new airport.

As Ascent Aviation managing director Benjamin Reid points out, it is an industry regulation, not to mention simple common sense, to carry additional fuel in case the airport at which you intend to land is unavailable because of weather or an accident.

For planes landing in Perth, the alternative airport is determined by the type of planes and the airline's own minimum standards.

For a 500-seat A380, the alternative is Adelaide. The pilots in a 365-seat Boeing 777 may opt for Learmonth.

Port Hedland might be the target for the slightly smaller Airbus A330.

The "Plan B" airports have one thing in common: they are all a very long way from Perth.

Think a new international airport in WA's Wheatbelt doesn't make sense? **Geoffrey Thomas** explains why it's all about fuel economics.

That means a lot of extra fuel has to be carried which, in turn, means less paying payload.

The plane will also burn more fuel to carry that extra fuel.

How much extra? Quite a bit. For a typical airline operating from, say, Asia to New York, the alternate fuel load would be just 2 per cent of the total fuel load.

For Perth-bound planes it is between 18 per cent and 22 per cent, depending upon circumstances.

That additional fuel is often the difference between profit and loss, given the airline industry's average return after tax over the past 20 years of between 2 per cent and 3 per cent.

If planes could land at Cunderdin, 158km from Perth, things would be very different. Virtually all services to Perth would be economically viable.

The economics of many

routes are knife-edge and when you overlay operational challenges, such as a diversion to Adelaide, many airlines walk away.

It is not a once-in-a-blue-moon event situation, either. Perth has about 12 fog events a year and it is forecast sometimes as many as 50 times a year. And while Perth Airport is upgrading its autoland capability for fog it does not eliminate the requirement for diversion fuel.

Diversions are expensive.

Emirates this month said that the total cost of a medical diversion could be as high as \$US600,000 (\$780,000). A diversion to Adelaide from Perth in 2012 cost the airline \$US500,000, with the stranded plane being flown back to Dubai empty.

On top of the fuel cost, the big hit to the bottom line is paying for accommodation for the passengers and/or buying

tickets for them on other airlines to get to their destination.

An Adelaide diversion automatically means the crew are over on-duty time and cannot fly for another 12 hours. A diversion to Cunderdin offers the strong possibility of returning to Perth once the primary airport can be accessed again.

This makes Cunderdin far more attractive than say Busseton or Geraldton as an alternative.

The additional attraction for Cunderdin is that it is far enough away from Perth that weather that would close the city airport would not cause the same problems.

According to one airline source, Cunderdin would be acceptable as an alternative for 97 per cent of flights.

Ascent Aviation's plans, which have bipartisan political support, has already had one major airline signed up. Ascent

expects to finalise contracts with others shortly, with a go-ahead for the project by mid-year.

The airport will have a 2600m runway with full international landing aids to meet diversion standards and have the capacity for up to four A380-sized planes.

The second phase would be the development of a pilot training college. The third phase involves handling cargo freighters.

Phases two and three would take the cost to \$200 million.

Cunderdin is on the Perth-Kalgoorlie rail link, thus a high-speed connection is a possibility in the future for at least some part of the journey.

Mr Reid said that from the outset, the company had achieved in-principle support from major international airlines.

"We secured our foundation international airline customer in November 2016 and are in advanced discussions with the remainder of the key airlines."

The redevelopment of Cunderdin Airport first ticks all the boxes and will make Perth a far more attractive destination for airlines.

ALTERNATIVES TO PERTH AIRPORT

