

Opening statement to Senate Hearing on noise impacts of aircraft on communities 9 August 2024 **Annette Cam President Blue Mountains Conservation Society**

Thank you for holding this hearing in Western Sydney.

As President of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society, I represent a 60-year-old organisation with over 850 members and a strong history of successful conservation of the Blue Mountains environment.

Today, in Katoomba, the World Heritage Institute is holding their inaugural conference. One conference theme is “Investing in and Benefitting from Nature”. I open with a quote from their program:

“The Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area . . .delivers the crucial ecosystem services of clean air and water for millions of humans and animals alike; it is the largest remaining stronghold of biodiversity in New South Wales; and it provides eco-recreation and visitation opportunities for a human population urgently needing reconnection and to de-stress. (It) is worthy of deep, ongoing investment.”¹

This airport’s runway lies 8 km from the World Heritage Area. This southern section will be severely impacted by frequent overflights at 2500 ft and noise levels up to, or in excess of, 70dBA. The natural quiet of wilderness will be at risk. In 1999, the World Heritage nomination was deferred due to concerns about the impact of this airport. In 2023, UNESCO listed the airport as a factor affecting the property.

The 2023 Draft EIS is flawed. No baseline noise or biodiversity data from the World Heritage Area was collected. This happened with the 2016 EIS. WSI had seven years to rectify this failure and yet did not do so. You can’t mitigate against threats that you don’t know exist. Hence, they have failed to propose any plans for eliminating or mitigating threats to the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Area.

To avoid adverse impacts we need:

1. Scientifically determined minimum levels of aircraft noise that may harm wildlife.
2. Accurate, scientifically rigorous ambient noise and biodiversity data from the World Heritage Area and adjacent State Conservation Parks.
3. Ongoing, rigorous monitoring of the effects of overflights on fauna, conducted by independent bodies using best practice data-collection methods.
4. Application of the “Precautionary principle” as per the EPBC Act². It says “a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing a measure to prevent degradation of the environment where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage.” This principle is also referenced in the UNESCO’s Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessment in a World Heritage Context.
5. No flights over the World Heritage Area under 30,000ft in line with best international practice.

The Society does not advocate for the protection of nature at the expense of people. Our members are an important part of our community. Air Services Australia must not attempt to solve the issues of airport noise by pitting people against the environment or communities against each other. The community must be listened to, and the issues must be solved satisfactorily for all.

¹ GBMWA Conference 2024 program Themes: Investing and Benefitting from Nature.

² Federal EPBC Act 1999 (version 2023) Section 391 (2)

Additional comments (not included in spoken Opening Address due to time constraints).

The Society campaigned for the nomination of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, which was accepted in the year 2000. We did this in association with other organisations including the Colong Foundation (now Wilderness Australia and represented today by Keith Muir); our expert members were included in writing the nomination. It is this unique area of exceptional Outstanding Universal Value, an asset of global and intergenerational significance, that we are here today to protect.

In proposing the World Heritage nomination, the Australian Federal Government and NSW State government, in line with UNESCO requirements, committed to protecting these areas from any activity likely to result in their degradation or cause diminishment of its Outstanding Universal Value. This includes protection of the declared wilderness listed under NSW law by the Wilderness Act 1987.

Air Services Australia admitted in the draft 2023 EIS that wildlife and the natural quiet and visual amenity of the Blue Mountains WHA will be detrimentally affected by overflights; yet they dismiss these effects as unimportant and that they will be outweighed by the economic benefits of the airport. This is flawed thinking as much of the tourism in the Blue Mountains is linked to the World Heritage Area and wilderness values.

We recognise the importance of protecting these natural areas for their own intrinsic values. The Society also acknowledges that they are important economically **as a world heritage asset** for tourism, and for the mental health of those seeking quiet solitude and the enjoyment of nature.

The industry and governments need to accept that aircraft noise is a form of pollution and define it as such; that is has adverse impacts on human health and communities, on wildlife and natural areas. Aircraft noise needs to be regulated through effective mechanisms independent from Air Services Australia.

Western Sydney airport lies 10km from the closest boundary with the eastern border of the GBMA, near the village of Mulgoa. Burratorang State Conservation Area is 13 km from the airport, adjoins the GBMA and Lake Burratorang, the dam for Sydney's drinking water, and lies within the airport's wildlife buffer zone. These are only two examples of areas which will be severely impacted by a high number of overflights at a height of 2500 ft and noise levels up to 70dBA

In collection of data and devising mitigation of impacts, emphasis should be placed on those species which are likely to be subject to wildlife strike by aircraft and those that may be adversely affected by frequent, loud noise from overflights.

These issues are further discussed in the Society's submission to the draft EIS for WSI flight paths and our submission to this Inquiry. We have provided both to this hearing.

UNESCO lists these factors affecting the property in 2023³:

- Air transport infrastructure
- Fire (wildfires)
- Mining
- Water infrastructure

³ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4491>