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New airport runway rules could boost regional airports; airlines hope for new routes, savings

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Senior Business Reporter · NZ Herald · 7 Aug, 2026 05:00 AM 5 mins to read

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Changes to airport runway safety rules could make new regional routes viable.

The rule changes announced today take effect on August 31 and abolish regulations many in the industry found onerous.

Air Chathams chief executive Duane Emeny said the old rules hindered regional airports from easily making changes to airport dimensions.

He told the *Herald* the old rules had scuppered plans for a revived Masterton service.

"Air Chathams was talking to the district council there about the possibility of restarting regional services but unfortunately we hit that roadblock."

Today's announcement introduces shorter runway end safety area (RESA) lengths for smaller airports.

"One, it potentially creates these opportunities for more regional carriers," Emeny said.

"Secondly, it takes the stress away from existing airports that want to make change."

Emeny said Associate Transport Minister James Meager had "encouraged the sector to come to him with some of the dumb rules, if you like" and suggest changes.

He said the Civil Aviation Rule in question was "definitely top of the list" and the change was good to see.

The relevant issue related to Civil Aviation Rule Part 139. It required a RESA in some cases to be as close as possible to 240m from the end of a runway strip.

The rule was for aircraft with more than 30 seats, so applied to the 68-seater ATR72 and 34-seater Saab 340 turboprops in the Air Chathams fleet.

An alternative safety set-up is the engineered materials arresting systems (Emas), a type of safety bed with crushable material installed at runway ends.

Sunair chief executive Doug Roberts said the rule change was good news for regional airports.

"You are actually increasing the effective operating length of the runway, which can allow for greater payloads."

He said if Sunair one day added larger turboprops to its current fleet, it would benefit.

NZ Airports Association said the decision would introduce more flexible RESA options for regional airports.

NZ Airports chief executive Graeme Sharman said airports had been calling for reform for several years.

He said he was happy Meager and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) had taken action.

"The changes maintain a strong focus on safety while giving airports more proportionate and practical options suited to their individual circumstances."

He said RESA extensions could face cost, land and engineering constraints.

"Allowing properly assessed alternatives, including shorter RESAs where appropriate, and aircraft arresting systems, can support safe and sustainable regional air services."

Board of Airline Representatives (Barnz) executive director Cath O'Brien said the rule change moved New Zealand to global standard practice.

Barnz supported Emas as a way of meeting runway safety needs.

In March, Wellington Airport completed installation of its own Emas – [new safety zones with energy-absorbing blocks at each runway end](#).

Emas provided a buffer in case of an accidental aircraft overrun.

"By recognising modern technology like arresting systems, airports, especially those with constraints at their land boundaries, have smarter, more flexible ways to manage safety," O'Brien added.

However, she also said airports would need to show fiscal discipline.

"It is critical that airports pick proportional, cost-effective solutions so we avoid over-investment and unnecessary cost burdens on airlines and the travelling public."

Aviation Industry Association chief executive Simon Wallace said the change could mean regional airports spent less money on runways, freeing up chances to invest more in terminals or other facilities.

"The industry would like to think if there are lower investment costs for regional airports, that would translate to lower charges, for example, lower landing charges.

"Over time, these lower charges could be passed on to the airlines ... making it more economically viable for airlines to go into places like Masterton," he said.

"We've got a whole issue around regional sustainability. If this can help towards restarting some of that regional connectivity, that's a really good thing."

He said the rule change would not compromise safety at any airports.

Wallace said it was good the changes would take effect on August 31, rather than being dragged out for years.

Meager said the new civil aviation rule would free smaller airports from blanket industry regulations and unnecessary compliance costs.

He said the old one-size-fits-all requirement had arrested the growth of some smaller airports.

The new rule would streamline the approvals process for proposed RESAs.

"This provides operators with a practical and safe alternative to adding extra length, which is costly and not economically viable for all."

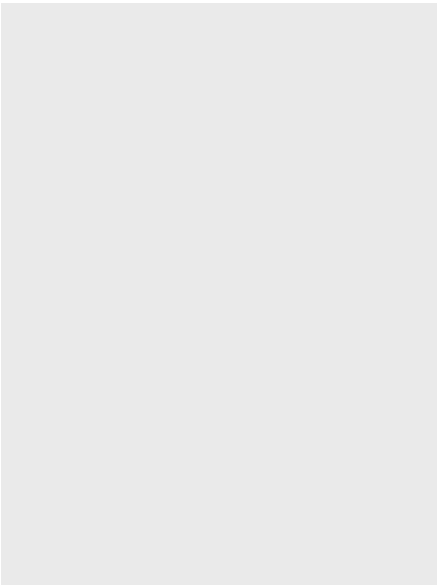
Meager said the new rule would boost regional airport development, "directly accelerating national economic growth by unlocking isolated markets, boosting high-value tourism and building resilient supply chains".

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

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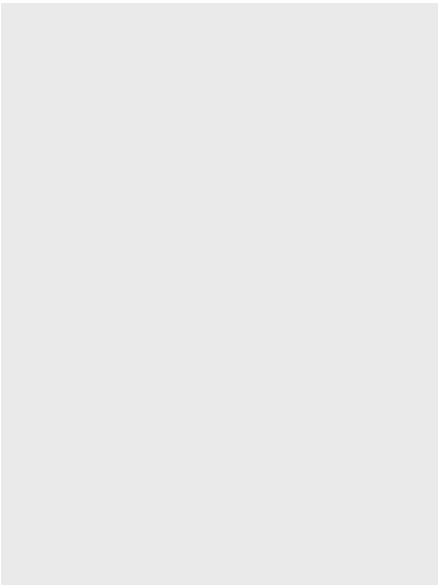
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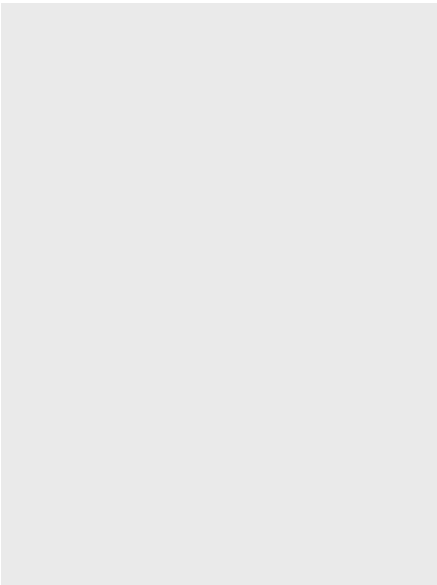
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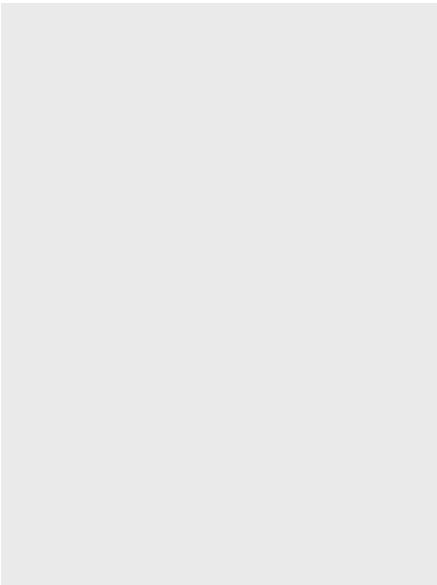
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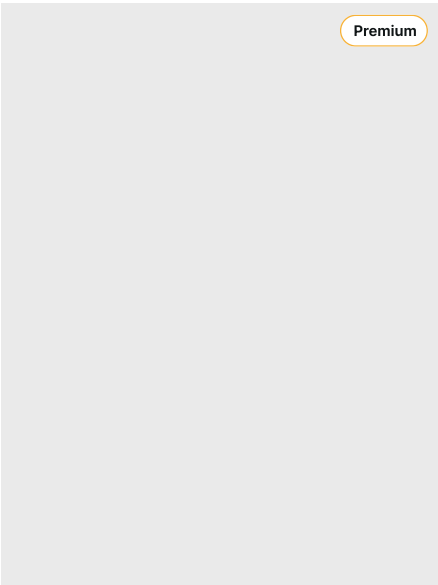
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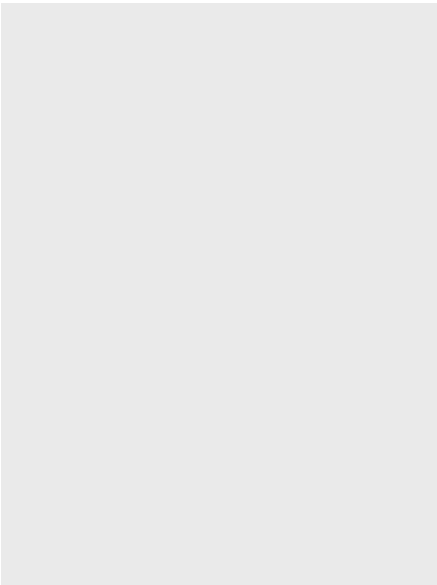


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