

AIR VANUATU SAYS INDEPENDENT REPORT SHOWS PORT VILA RUNWAY SAFE

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Air Vanuatu says an independent report of the runway conditions at Bauerfield Airport has determined it is safe to operate jet flights into and out of Port Vila.

The airline says it is “satisfied the condition of the runway is safe to continue jet operations” based on the independent assessment from Australian-based ACG.

“The report found no sign of any foreign object debris (FOD) of any size on the runway surface and recommended ‘runway sweeping operations should continue at its current frequency until such a time as surface rejuvenation is undertaken’,” Air Vanuatu said in a statement on Wednesday.

“The report further recommended contingency plans for Air Vanuatu in order to maintain safe operations, including the requirement for Airports Vanuatu Limited (AVL) to remove excess water from the runway prior to landing during heavy rainfall.

“Our flight captains have the final say should the extra safety measures in place, including daily mechanical ‘sweeping’ of the runway and removing excess water not meet our standards.”

Virgin Australia and Air New Zealand have suspended flights into and out of Port Vila due to concerns about the runway.

However, Air Vanuatu and Solomon Airlines have maintained their jet services into and out of Bauerfield Airport.

A World Bank concessional loan of US\$59.5 million to the Vanuatu Government was announced in 2015 that would include resurfacing the airport's single runway, the 2,600m long runway 11/29. However, the work has not commenced.

Air Vanuatu said there have been "open and honest discussions" during daily briefings with Bauerfield Airport operator Airports Vanuatu Ltd and the Civil Aviation Authority of Vanuatu (CAAV) over the state of the airport.

"We have been pleased with the swift response of the authorities to increase precautionary measures at our request," Air Vanuatu said.

"We continue to share information with overseas carriers, some of whom have not attended any of these briefings nor conducted independent inspections, yet suspended jet services.

"Air Vanuatu operates under a safety first policy at all times and will continue to do so. Should conditions deteriorate before the planned upgrade of the runway commences, we will review services to Port Vila."

Air Vanuatu's new Boeing 737-800, which it acquired via lease from Air Lease Corporation, arrived at Port Vila earlier this week and was scheduled to operate its first commercial service on Wednesday. The aircraft will be serviced and maintained by Qantas Engineering in Brisbane.

The Air Vanuatu chief executive Joseph Laloyer said the aircraft would maintain air links to the country after Virgin and Air NZ stopped flying.

"To really show that we are ready for tourism and to give them some reassurance that the airport we are operating in and out of, being Bauerfield, is safe and there is no issue, really, with this airport," Laloyer told the Radio New Zealand website on February 2.

World Bank regional director Franz Drees-Gross told the Radio Australia website in a French-language news report on January 28 a plan to fully repair the runway was drawn up in the second half of 2015.

"I believe that by year's end, the government was left somewhat distracted by its internal problems and divergent views on the need, or not, to repair the entire runway. But we discussed it and I think it's clearer now," Drees-Gross said.

Drees-Gross said a World Bank delegation would visit Port Vila shortly.

"Our team will arrive on February 8. This is a technical team. We hope to reach agreement with Airports Vanuatu and other partners to carry out repairs immediately, which could be an emergency procedure," he said.

"It would start work in a few weeks. The other purpose of this mission is to reach agreement on the full repair of the airport."

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN AVIATION

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