

Voice Of The Industry



BY THE FREIGHT & TRADE ALLIANCE

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THE Australian air cargo sector is on the cusp of a significant transformation. With the opening of Western Sydney International Airport in 2026, alongside ongoing developments at existing hubs like Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Perth, the country's freight landscape is entering a new era. These changes are not just about capacity, they touch on operational efficiency, regulatory engagement, and how airports and airlines collaborate with freight operators to support Australia's growing economy.

As part of our advocacy at the Freight and Trade Alliance (FTA) and the Australian Peak Shippers Association (APSA), we recently provided submissions to several airport authorities on their draft Master Plans, reflecting the feedback of our members. This has given us the opportunity to see firsthand how these developments are shaping thinking across the sector. Airports are no longer just points of departure and arrival; they are integrated logistics hubs that connect air, road, and sea freight, and increasingly, they must plan for growth while balancing community expectations, environmental requirements, and supply chain resilience.

The upcoming Western Sydney International Airport represents a seismic shift in the Australian air cargo network. Strategically positioned to serve Western Sydney's rapidly growing population and industrial zones, it will provide additional capacity to complement Kingsford Smith Airport in Sydney. For air cargo operators, the new airport promises not only expanded infrastructure but also improved access for large freighters, streamlined freight handling processes, and opportunities for overnight and express freight operations.

The Master Plan for Western Sydney International has highlighted these opportunities but also raised important questions for industry. How will the new airport integrate with existing road and rail freight networks? What will be the operating hours, and how will noise and environmental impacts be managed? And critically, how will cargo operators transition smoothly to a new operational hub while maintaining service levels for customers?

In preparing submissions, we emphasised that successful cargo operations depend on predictability, connectivity, and efficiency.

Without these, even the most modern airport infrastructure cannot deliver the value promised to operators or the broader supply chain.

While Western Sydney International garners much of the attention, existing airports are also responding to changing freight dynamics. Sydney Kingsford Smith, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Perth are all reviewing their Master Plans to accommodate growth in e-commerce, pharmaceuticals, and perishable goods - segments that require fast, reliable, and temperature-controlled handling.

For example, at Brisbane Airport, our submissions highlighted the importance of planning for off-peak freight operations, which can alleviate congestion, reduce delays, and improve efficiency for all operators. Similarly, Perth Airport's draft Master Plan raised questions about road access, freight handling facilities, and the interface with airside operations. Addressing these operational considerations early is critical: airport planning is about more than just expanding tarmac or warehouses, it's about ensuring that freight moves safely, quickly, and cost-effectively.

One recurring theme across all submissions was the need for early and meaningful consultation between airports, freight operators, airlines, and government regulators. Airports are complex ecosystems, and their success depends on effective collaboration. Draft Master Plans provide a crucial opportunity for industry to offer feedback, highlight operational realities, and help airports align growth plans with the needs of the supply chain.

In practice, this means discussing issues such as freight handling capacity, truck access and scheduling, curfew and night-time operations, and technology adoption, from automated cargo handling to advanced security and tracking systems. We highlighted the need to integrate these elements into long-term planning, ensuring Australia's air cargo network remains competitive regionally and globally.

Several broader trends are shaping the landscape. The rise of e-commerce has created growing demand for fast, reliable freight, particularly for small parcels and perishable goods. At the same time, temperature-sensitive cargo, like pharmaceuticals and

perishable foods, is becoming a larger component of air freight, requiring specialised facilities and careful handling. Technology is also transforming operations: automation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation are streamlining cargo handling and scheduling, and new airports like Western Sydney International are positioned to integrate these technologies from day one. Sustainability and environmental considerations are now central to planning, with airports seeking greener logistics and energy-efficient infrastructure. Finally, recent global disruptions have highlighted the importance of resilient and flexible supply chains, ensuring airports can maintain operations under pressure.

The coming years will see Australia's air cargo system evolve from a series of individual airports into an interconnected, multi-modal network, with Western Sydney International acting as a new gateway, complementing existing hubs. This growth is not only about handling more freight but about improving efficiency, reliability, and integration with road and rail networks, allowing Australian exporters and importers to compete more effectively on the global stage.

From the FTA/APSA perspective, having engaged with the draft Master Plans and collaborated with operators across the country, it's clear that the industry is at a pivotal moment. Airports are not just infrastructure, they are critical enablers of commerce, innovation, and connectivity. Ensuring that their development meets both operational needs and community expectations will determine the success of Australia's air cargo network for decades to come.

With Western Sydney International set to open in 2026, and existing airports continuing to modernise and expand, the Australian air cargo landscape is changing fast. Early engagement, thoughtful planning, and a focus on connectivity, efficiency, and sustainability will be the keys to unlocking the full potential of this network. For freight operators, airlines, regulators, and communities alike, these are exciting times, and the next few years will set the foundation for Australia's freight competitiveness well into the future.