



Australian Government

Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Collision with water involving Cessna 210N, VH-RDH

14 km south-east of Goolwa Airport, South Australia, on 6 February 2026



ATSB Transport Safety Report
Aviation Occurrence Investigation
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Preliminary – 4 March 2026

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Acknowledgement of Country and Traditional Owners

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to elders both past and present.

Preliminary report

This preliminary report details factual information established in the investigation's early evidence collection phase and has been prepared to provide timely information to the industry and public. Preliminary reports contain no analysis or findings, which will be detailed in the investigation's final report. The information contained in this preliminary report is released in accordance with section 25 of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003*.

The occurrence

On 6 February 2026, at about 1608 local time, a Cessna 210N, registered VH-RDH, departed from Goolwa Airport, South Australia, with 3 persons on board for a private local area flight. The persons on board comprised a flight instructor in the front right seat, a commercial pilot licence holder in the front left seat and a passenger, who held a recreational pilot licence, in the second row left seat. The purpose of the flight was for the commercial pilot licence holder to accumulate Cessna 210 flying experience. This was conducted under the supervision of the aircraft operator's head of training and checking, who was the onboard flight instructor.

Air Traffic Control (ATC) radar detected the aircraft at 1609:45 and the ATC system started generating a track for the aircraft at 1609:50 at an uncorrected altitude¹ of 1,100 ft and groundspeed of 93 kt. Calculated barometric altitude² started at 1609:58 and recorded the aircraft at 1,275 ft and a groundspeed of 93 kt.³ Goolwa Airport CTAF⁴ recordings captured a runway 19 upwind departure call from the instructor, that they were climbing through 1,000 ft to 1,500 ft and tracking coastal to the east. The departure call was followed by an amendment that the aircraft was climbing to 2,500 ft for smoother air.

ATC radar tracked the aircraft as it followed the coast to the east at about 2,350 ft for about 5 minutes at about 130 kt. The aircraft then commenced a right turn through south to track west along the coast back towards the mouth of the Murray River (Murray Mouth) at about 136 kt. As the aircraft approached Murray Mouth, the altitude increased and reached 3,375 ft at 1620:52. As the aircraft climbed above 3,000 ft the tracking data shifted slightly south (at 1620:17) and the speed reduced to 74 kt while maintaining a westerly track.

At 1620:57 the aircraft was recorded at an uncorrected altitude of 2,700 ft, still on a westerly track, and the speed had reduced to 66 kt. The ATC system then ceased tracking the aircraft, but it was captured a final time on radar at 1621:05, at an uncorrected altitude of 1,200 ft. Figure 1 depicts the accident flight with 4 data points annotated.

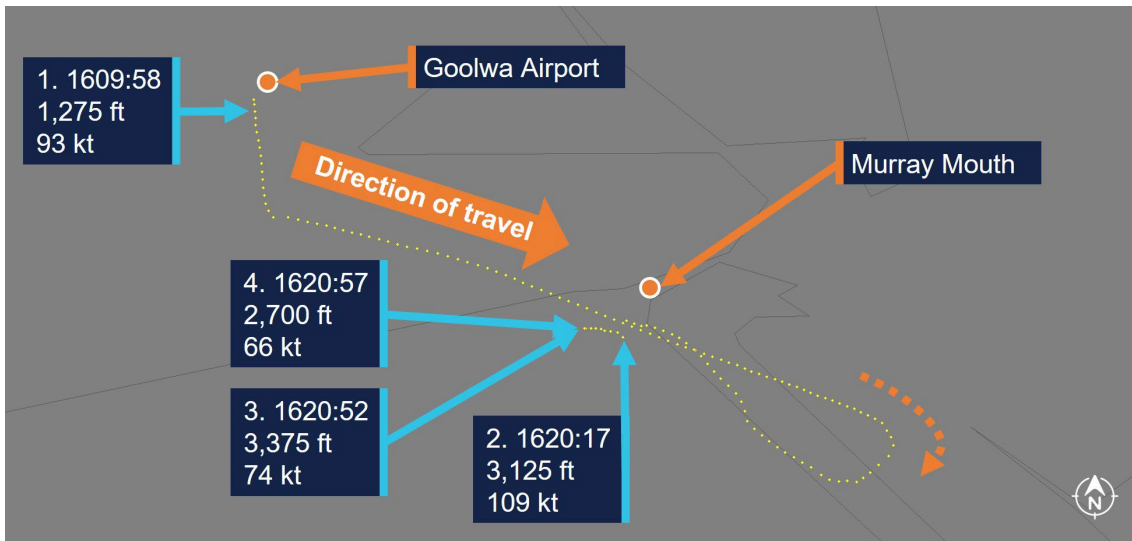
¹ Uncorrected altitude data was based on the standard atmosphere altimeter pressure setting of 1013 hPa, rounded to the nearest hundred feet.

² The calculated barometric altitude was based on the Adelaide altimeter pressure setting of 1015 hPa.

³ All speeds in the report are ATC-recorded groundspeeds.

⁴ CTAF: common traffic advisory frequency is the radio frequency used by pilots when operating in the vicinity of non-towered airports.

Figure 1: Air traffic control generated track with data points annotated



Airservices Australia generated tracking data for the accident flight with ATSB numbered data points – at data point 2 the aircraft has climbed above 3,000 ft and the track has shifted to the south.
Source: Airservices Australia, annotated by the ATSB

A witness located on the west side of Murray Mouth observed the aircraft in a steep descent and used their phone to record the final seconds of the descent. The footage indicated the aircraft was in a left turn spin just prior to colliding with the water in a steep nose down and left-wing low attitude, intact with the landing gear retracted. Several witnesses reported to the ATSB that the engine sounded like it was running until the collision. The 3 occupants were fatally injured and the aircraft was destroyed.

Wreckage inspection

The wreckage was retrieved from the water by South Australia Police prior to the ATSB's arrival at the site on the afternoon of 7 February 2026. The wreckage was heavily fragmented and missing the engine, propeller, wings, vertical fin and rudder. The main gear was found down and locked and the nose gear retracted. Several seat belts had been cut by emergency services personnel to remove the occupants.

The left front seat was attached to the seat rails and fitted with an inertial reel strap to prevent inadvertent movement in flight. The strap was cut to remove the seat from the aircraft. The front right seat had separated from the seat rails, but the seat lock pins were in the down (locked) position and appeared undamaged. The second row left seat had separated from the floor of the aircraft but was contained within the wreckage. The second row right seat was not fitted. The rear seats (third row) were attached to the airframe.

The elevator control cables were identified, and the elevator trim surface was present and attached to the elevator. The elevator was free to move in the correct sense. Measurements of the elevator trim position were made, and an elevator control cable turnbuckle was removed and, in addition to the aircraft global positioning system unit, retained for further examination.

Further investigation

To date, the ATSB has:

- inspected the wreckage and the departure airport's fuel supply
- recovered and retained equipment for further examination
- collected records from the aircraft operator and Civil Aviation Safety Authority
- collected air traffic control and airport data
- collected electronic flight bag data
- interviewed witnesses and other Cessna 210 pilots.

The investigation is continuing and will include:

- further interviews
- a review of aircraft operator and Civil Aviation Safety Authority records
- analysis of witness videos, photographs, airport data and interviews
- analysis of data from air traffic control, electronic flight bags and from equipment recovered from the aircraft.

A final report will be released at the conclusion of the investigation. Should a critical safety issue be identified during the course of the investigation, the ATSB will immediately notify relevant parties so appropriate and timely safety action can be taken.

Acknowledgements

The ATSB acknowledges the assistance provided by South Australia Police and State Emergency Service personnel.

General details

Occurrence details

Date and time:	6 February 2026 – 1621 Central Daylight-saving Time	
Occurrence class:	Accident	
Occurrence categories:	Collision with terrain	
Location:	14.3 km 129° from Goolwa Airport, South Australia	
	Latitude: 35.5628° S	Longitude: 138.8740° E

Aircraft details

Manufacturer and model:	Cessna Aircraft Company 210N	
Registration:	VH-RDH	
Operator:	Goolwa Air	
Serial number:	21064374	
Type of operation:	Part 91 General operating and flight rules-Other	
Activity:	General aviation / Recreational-Other general aviation flying-Other flights	
Departure:	Goolwa Airport, South Australia	
Destination:	Goolwa Airport, South Australia	
Persons on board:	Crew – 2	Passengers – 1
Injuries:	Crew – 2 fatal	Passengers – 1 fatal
Aircraft damage:	Destroyed	

About the ATSB

The **Australian Transport Safety Bureau** is the national transport safety investigator. Established by the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (TSI Act), the ATSB is an independent statutory agency of the Australian Government and is governed by a Commission. The ATSB is entirely separate from transport regulators, policy makers and service providers.

The ATSB's function is to improve transport safety in aviation, rail and shipping through:

- the independent investigation of transport accidents and other safety occurrences
- safety data recording, analysis, and research
- influencing safety action.

The ATSB prioritises investigations that have the potential to deliver the greatest public benefit through improvements to transport safety.

The ATSB performs its functions in accordance with the provisions of the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* and Regulations and, where applicable, international agreements.

Purpose of safety investigations

The objective of a safety investigation is to enhance transport safety. This is done through:

- identifying safety issues and facilitating safety action to address those issues
- providing information about occurrences and their associated safety factors to facilitate learning within the transport industry.

It is not a function of the ATSB to apportion blame or provide a means for determining liability. At the same time, an investigation report must include factual material of sufficient weight to support the analysis and findings.

At all times the ATSB endeavours to balance the use of material that could imply adverse comment with the need to properly explain what happened, and why, in a fair and unbiased manner.

The ATSB does not investigate for the purpose of taking administrative, regulatory or criminal action.

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