



Australian Government

Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Information and guidelines for aerodrome operators

Introduction

This guideline has been prepared by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) to:

- outline the role and responsibilities of the ATSB
- detail required actions by an aerodrome operator in the event of an aviation accident
- outline possible actions by the ATSB to investigate an aviation accident.

Who is the ATSB?

The ATSB is an independent Commonwealth Government statutory agency governed by a Commission. It investigates transport safety occurrences in accordance with the Australian *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (TSI Act). The ATSB is responsible for investigating accidents and incidents involving civilian aircraft. The ATSB is entirely separate from the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) and Airservices Australia.

The ATSB investigates to find out what happened and to disseminate safety messages aimed at preventing or minimising repeat occurrences. It does not seek to apportion blame or legal liability.

The ATSB has powers under the TSI Act to secure the site of an accident and to preserve evidence associated with it. The international standards and recommended practices for aircraft accident and serious-incident investigations are covered under Annex 13 to the Chicago Convention of 1944, to which Australia is a signatory.

Actions in the event of an aircraft accident

If an aircraft accident occurs, an aerodrome operator must:

- respond to the accident in accordance with the aerodrome emergency plan
- report the accident to the ATSB
- in conjunction with emergency services, preserve the scene for accident investigation.

Definition

An accident for the purposes of this guide is an occurrence involving an aircraft where:

- a person dies or sustains serious injury
- the aircraft is destroyed or is seriously damaged, or
- any property is destroyed or seriously damaged.

Reporting

Under the TSI Act and Regulations, a 'Responsible Person' must report an aircraft accident immediately to the ATSB. The TSI Regulations define a Responsible Person to include the owner, operator or crew of the aircraft, as well as other aviation personnel including the operator of an aerodrome.

How

Phone: 24-hour toll-free ATSB reporting number: 1800 011 034.

If calling from outside Australia, please use +61 2 6230 4470.

What information should I report?

You should immediately report as many of the following details as possible:

- your name and contact details
- aircraft registration and manufacturer/model if known
- date and time of the accident
- location of the accident
- nature of the accident (for example: phase of flight and description of occurrence)
- extent of any injuries to the occupant(s) or others
- extent of damage to the aircraft
- number of crew and passengers
- any response by police or emergency personnel
- action taken to secure the accident site.

ATSB accident investigation

How will the ATSB respond?

The ATSB has investigators on call 24 hours a day to respond to aviation incidents and accidents. If investigators attend the scene of an accident, it may take some time for them to travel to the location. In the meantime, aerodrome operators and first responders have a role to make sure that the accident site is secured to ensure safety and to preserve evidence.

Preservation of evidence

Under Section 43 of the TSI Act, the ATSB may issue a Protection Order for the accident site to ensure the preservation of evidence.

The purpose of the Protection Order is to secure the accident site to prevent unauthorised persons from entering the area and to minimise disruption to, or loss of, evidence.

The Protection Order prohibits anyone from entering or interfering with the accident site unless authorised by the ATSB or where necessary to:

- ensure the safety of persons, animals or property
- remove deceased persons or animals from the accident site (although this should only be done under police supervision)
- move the aircraft, or the wreckage of the aircraft, to a safe place (if there is a risk that significant evidence could be lost if it was not moved)
- protect the environment from significant damage or pollution.

A Protection Order may be issued verbally in the first instance – for example, over the phone – with written confirmation to follow. The Protection Order may initially be made over an area much larger than the immediate accident site, such as over the approach to the aerodrome.

The Protection Order may be provided directly to the aerodrome or the emergency services. It is imperative that the aerodrome and emergency services work together to ensure the Protection Order is followed.

The ATSB may grant permission under a Protection Order for certain specified actions to be taken that otherwise would be prohibited by the Order. The Protection Order will be revoked when it is no longer required for the purpose of the ATSB investigation.

The secure area may vary depending on the spread of the wreckage and the terrain, but it should normally extend to at least 50 m from the edge of the wreckage. If the aircraft has disintegrated in-flight, the wreckage may be scattered over a wide area and there may be a requirement for more than one secured site.

The role of first responders

First responders need to deal with the immediate aftermath of an accident, including rescuing and attending to survivors or removing the deceased and dealing with fire and hazardous materials. The ATSB will be available by phone to first responders on the ground to provide advice and make arrangements for the security of the site until ATSB investigators arrive.

Information relevant to first responders is made available in the ATSB publication *Hazards at aviation accident sites: Guidance for police and emergency personnel* (<https://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/safety-education-material/2022/aviation/hazards-aviation-accident-sites>).

When the ATSB investigators arrive at the accident site they will coordinate with the site commander to arrange an appropriate time to take control of the site.

Recovery and resumption of normal operations

Depending on the exact location and severity of the accident, aerodrome operations may be curtailed or have to cease completely during the onsite phase of the investigation. The time taken for the onsite phase of an investigation will vary depending on the circumstances.

For an accident involving a light aircraft, it may typically be several days. However, the onsite investigation phase may be considerably longer for an accident involving a larger aircraft.

The ATSB will make every effort to minimise the effect of the investigation on aerodrome operations, to the extent that it can without compromising the investigation process. Under Section 12AC of the TSI Act, the ATSB must have regard to the desirability of minimising any disruption.

Recovery and salvage of the wreckage

After the onsite investigation is completed or if the ATSB decides not to conduct an onsite investigation, the ATSB Investigator in Charge (IIC) will advise other parties when the ATSB no longer requires control over the aircraft wreckage. The ATSB may require all or part of the wreckage for offsite examination. To assist expedient removal of aircraft wreckage, it would be useful for the aerodrome operator to maintain a register of local secure storage facilities, and crane and haulage operators, capable of moving and

storing wreckage and components corresponding to the size of aircraft operating from that aerodrome.

The ATSB will offer the wreckage to the coroner and CASA prior to releasing it back to the aircraft owner/operator.

Arrangements for salvage and site clean-up are then a matter for the aircraft owner/operator and the aerodrome operator.

Will the ATSB always investigate?

The ATSB does not investigate all aviation accidents. The ATSB selectively investigates serious occurrences including fatal accidents that it believes will yield the most useful safety benefits for the travelling public.

In some cases the ATSB will conduct an office-based investigation that does not require physical attendance by ATSB investigators. In that case, the ATSB will provide advice to first responders and other relevant organisations including the aerodrome operator as to the ATSB's requirements. This cooperation could include asking the aerodrome operator to capture detailed photographs of the accident site or to quarantine any recorded information, such as Avdata radio transmission recordings.

Media

Depending on the exact location and severity of the accident, a spokesperson from the ATSB may deploy to the accident site to manage the media interest, and to provide journalists with a briefing.

Should a media spokesperson not be available, aerodrome operators are encouraged to direct all media enquires about the investigation to the ATSB.

Email: media@atsb.gov.au

Phone: 1800 020 616

The ATSB may publish short factual statements about the accident on its website and social media channels.

Aerodrome media officers are encouraged to contact the ATSB's media team at any time to discuss and confirm media activity and messaging following an accident. In addition, the ATSB should be considered when an aerodrome conducts its emergency plan training.

Witnesses

Should witnesses to the accident contact the aerodrome directly, operators should direct them to contact the ATSB.

Website: www.atsb.gov.au/witness Phone: 1800 992 986

Key message

In the event that an aerodrome operator is faced with an aircraft accident, a good understanding of the role of the ATSB and the investigation process will ensure that the investigation is not impeded and that disruption to aerodrome operations is minimised.