



MEDIA RELEASE

24 August 2026

Cloncurry Airport downgrade looms as government funding falls short

Cloncurry Shire Council is preparing for the possibility of downgrading the operational status of its major airport this wet season, potentially restricting FIFO planes from using the runway unless a further \$10 million in funding is secured for a permanent upgrade.

Mayor Greg Campbell said the downgrading of Cloncurry Airport's status would happen if there was potential for a repeat of the major runway failure earlier this year, which saw sections of tarmac damaged as a result of heavy rain.

A downgrade would restrict heavier jet aircraft from landing and taking off, potentially impacting FIFO mining operations across North West Queensland.

"It's not a decision we want to make, but we need to ensure our facility is safe," Cr Campbell said.

"The technical advice we are getting is that if we have a severe weather event like we had during this year's wet season, we will need to downgrade the airport to ensure we do not have another catastrophic failure of our key asset.

"It's critical that we protect our airstrip to prevent failure. The best solution would be to secure the required \$10 million and have the upgrades completed prior to the wet season."

Cr Campbell said this year's emergency repairs had restored the runway to near-normal operations, but the airport remained vulnerable until the council's planned \$26 million full rehabilitation program was completed.

"Without the full scope of the program completed, there is a chance that the patch put down to get the runway open could be damaged or broken through where planes land and wear the tarmac," he said.

The airport's vulnerability was exposed in January when a monsoon trough associated with ex-Tropical Cyclone Koji damaged sections of the runway.

The Commonwealth and Queensland governments subsequently committed \$11.5 million through Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) for repairs and resilience works, with about \$2 million used for emergency repairs to restore near-normal operations.

Cr Campbell said the remaining DRFA funding was secure, but a further \$10 million was needed to complete the broader \$26 million airport upgrade and avoid putting the runway at risk of another major failure during the coming wet season.

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He warned another significant weather event could see the available disaster funding consumed by further emergency repairs rather than a permanent solution.

Cloncurry Shire Council began planning the major runway rehabilitation about four years ago after inspections identified the airport was approaching the end of its useful life.

The project was designed not only to address the runway's condition, but to establish Cloncurry Airport as a broader aviation precinct and accommodate larger aircraft as demand grows in the resources sector.

The airport is a critical gateway for the region's mining workforce, supporting operations including Ernest Henry, Dugald River, Eloise, Austral Resources, Eva Copper, True North Copper and Rocklands, as well as future major projects including CopperString.

Cr Campbell said the council had been proactive in planning the upgrade well before the runway was damaged earlier this year.

"We've been working towards doing a major upgrade to the airport for probably four years now, where it was getting to the end of its life," he said.

"We were looking at growing our airport to be an aviation precinct.

"It all just seemed to line up. The stars really seemed to align – council being proactive, making sure that what is essentially the gateway for miners and industry into the North West had longevity and was secure."

However, Cr Campbell said delays and frustrating bureaucracy in the Federal Government's Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program (rPPP) had left the project without the final funding required to complete the works.

Cloncurry Shire Council initially applied for \$14.5 million through the program.

After the application had been submitted, the council went to tender and obtained accurate, market-tested construction prices.

Cr Campbell said the Shire was advised to update its application with the tendered figures, only for the change to subsequently be treated as a new submission.

That pushed the project from round two of the assessment process to round six, adding significant delays.

"The final advice that the CEO got gave us some confidence that we would be better off updating with the tendered prices," he said.

"But that was considered a resubmission and pushed us back. Instead of us being in round two, we ended up being assessed in round six."

Last week, Cr Campbell was told that Cloncurry Shire Council's funding application had not been successful.

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"We were advised to pursue other Commonwealth funding programs, but existing programs either do not apply to Cloncurry's circumstances or do not provide funding at the scale required for the project," he said.

Cr Campbell said Cloncurry Shire Council had already committed additional resources of its own and was working to protect the airport from a downgrade, but warned the funding gap remained beyond what the council should reasonably be expected to absorb.

"The \$10 million would really finish off the project and not put council under financial stress," he said.

The potential downgrade could also have broader implications for Cloncurry's commercial airline services if the runway's condition creates concerns among operators.

Cr Campbell said recent wet weather experience showed how quickly airline confidence could become an issue.

"We've seen with a bit of unseasonal rain through winter some Qantas pilots that were really, really risk-averse, where they were talking about not taking off because there were a few puddles," he said.

"So if there's a perception that the strip may not be 100 per cent, then there's every chance that other airlines may choose to not fly."

Cloncurry Shire Council is calling on either the state or federal government to intervene and commit the remaining funding required to complete the runway upgrade before the next major weather event.

Cr Campbell said the \$26 million project was about protecting a critical piece of regional infrastructure and ensuring the resources sector could continue to rely on Cloncurry as a safe and dependable gateway.

"Everyone seems to know how important the Cloncurry Airport is," he said.

"It's frustrating because we planned ahead, put together a sensible plan in advance so we weren't going to get caught out, and the people that should be helping us get that across the line haven't been there.

"We don't care if the funding comes from Canberra or Brisbane, but we need that extra \$10 million to get the work done so we can continue to be a major contributor to the economy."

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