Davis Aerodrome Project: Decision by Australia not to proceed, and knowledge gained of the Vestfold Hills environment

Davis Aerodrome Project: Decision by Australia not to proceed, and knowledge gained of the Vestfold Hills environment

**Information Paper submitted by Australia**

Summary

Australia has decided not to proceed with a proposal to construct and operate a paved runway near Davis research station in the Vestfold Hills, East Antarctica (the Davis Aerodrome Project), following careful consideration of the likely environmental impact, cost and complexity of the project. Consequently, Australia will not complete a draft Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation for circulation to Parties and the Committee for Environmental Protection. Significant progress had been made on assessing the environmental values of the Vestfold Hills and potential impacts of the proposal, informed by a range of subject matter experts and several seasons of detailed field investigations. The enhanced knowledge of the environment at the project site and surrounding region developed through these efforts will support Australia’s commitment to best practice environmental stewardship in Antarctica, including through the rigorous planning, assessment and conduct of future activities, and consideration of options for ongoing and enhanced environmental protection and management in the region.

Background

The 2016 *Australian Antarctic Strategy and 20 Year Action Plan* included a commitment to investigate year‑round aviation access between Australia and Antarctica[[1]](#footnote-1). At ATCM XLII (2019) Australia informed Parties about plans to construct a paved runway near Davis research station in the Vestfold Hills, East Antarctica (Figure 1), subject to environmental and other approvals[[2]](#footnote-2). The proposal recognised that the Australian Antarctic Program (AAP) and other national Antarctic programs have increasingly used aviation capabilities to support their own and joint scientific and logistics operations, and that year-round aviation access would considerably enhance the aviation capability available to the AAP and other national Antarctic programs that Australia works closely with in East Antarctica.

At CEP XXIII (2021) Australia submitted ATCM XLIII/IP102 *Preparation of a Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation for the proposed construction and operation of an aerodrome near Australia’s Davis research station (the Davis Aerodrome Project)*. The paper reported that the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) was undertaking planning activities for a proposal to construct and operate a paved, all-weather runway in Antarctica, near Davis research station (the Davis Aerodrome Project). It further noted that the proposal would be subject to the highest level of environmental scrutiny, including through the preparation and circulation of a Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation (CEE) in accordance with the requirements of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty.

Mapa

Descripción generada automáticamente

**Figure 1. Location of Australia’s Davis research station, Vestfold Hills, East Antarctica**

Decision not to proceed with the Davis Aerodrome Project

In November 2021 Australia decided not to proceed with the Davis Aerodrome Project, following careful consideration of the likely environmental impact, cost, and complexity of the lengthy construction process. Year-round access to Antarctica remains a worthy goal, but its value must be assessed against other opportunities to support Australia’s Antarctic engagement. While significant progress had been made on the environmental impact assessment process for the Davis Aerodrome Project, Australia will not complete the preparation of a draft CEE for circulation to Parties and the Committee for Environmental Protection.

Enhanced knowledge of the Vestfold Hills environment

In keeping with Australia’s commitment to best practice environmental stewardship in Antarctica, the planning for the Davis Aerodrome Project involved significant efforts to understand the environmental values and sensitivities of the area and address the environmental impacts of the proposal to the highest standards. A range of Antarctic environmental subject matter experts were engaged to provide advice and input into the development of the draft CEE. To establish a comprehensive understanding of the initial environmental reference state and inform the assessment of potential impacts, there was a thorough process to compile and analyse existing scientific data, and a dedicated program of field data collection each season from 2016/17 to 2021/22.

The project-specific field investigations included collection of samples, quantitative data, and images from well over 1000 terrestrial, freshwater and marine locations in the Vestfold Hills region, both in proximity to the project site and further afield. Consistent with the requirements of Annex I to the Environmental Protocol, and the guidance presented in the *Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment in Antarctica*, theseactivities aimed to systematically and thoroughly characterise the pre-activity state of the environment across all locations that might have been impacted.

The investigations considered biological features and processes that could have been affected directly or indirectly including, for example: lake and soil ecology (Figure 2); nearshore marine environment (Figure 3); seals; seabirds (flying birds, cavity nesting birds, penguins); cetaceans; and flora. The investigations also considered physical features and processes, such as: terrain and topography; coastal processes and sea ice; geology and soil; landscape, aesthetics and wilderness; air quality; noise / soundscape; weather; and heritage.

These detailed investigations have greatly increased understanding of the terrestrial, freshwater and marine environment in the Vestfold Hills. The scientific data collected will be progressively stored and managed by the Australian Antarctic Data Centre, and will support a range of publications that advance scientific knowledge of the Vestfold Hills. This enhanced knowledge will inform Australia’s existing operations and future Antarctic activities, including plans to modernise Davis research station. It will also inform consideration of options for ongoing and enhanced protection and management of the Vestfold Hills region, and support Australia’s commitment to leadership in Antarctic environmental stewardship.

As appropriate, Australia will report to future CEP meetings on experiences and information arising from the process to assess the environmental impacts of the Davis Aerodrome Project that may assist the work of the Parties and the CEP to comprehensively protect the Antarctic environment.

Mapa

Descripción generada automáticamente

Mapa

Descripción generada automáticamente

1. See [ATCM XXXIX/IP111](https://documents.ats.aq/ATCM39/ip/ATCM39_ip111_e.doc) *Australian Antarctic Strategy and Action Plan* (Australia) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See [ATCM XLII/IP089](https://documents.ats.aq/ATCM42/ip/ATCM42_ip089_e.doc) *Modernisation of Australia’s Antarctic Program* (Australia) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)