

# Hamilton Airport horse freight to take off

## Hamilton Airport plans freighting hub

ANDREA FOX Last updated 05:00 26/03/2012

Hamilton International Airport is planning a blue-chip horse freighting hub to handle the thousands of thoroughbreds that fly in and out of Auckland each year for racing and breeding.

The plan has been applauded by prominent thoroughbred players in the Waikato, the industry's capital, who spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year on horse air travel, mainly to and from Australia.

Yesterday, Cambridge trainer Roger James was preparing New Zealand Derby winner Silent Achiever for a trip to Melbourne tomorrow where the smart filly will take on Australia's top three-year-olds in Saturday's A\$500,000 Rosehill Guineas.

"That trip is made, at best, in 8 1/2 hours," James said. "So to cut three hours off that time by flying out of Hamilton will be huge for us and it helps to keep our horses in peak condition."

Airport chairman John Birch said the latest available figures show that almost 3000 horses are flown out of Auckland each year, and 50 per cent of them start their journey from Waikato stables and 25 per cent are from south of the Waikato region.

"So effectively, we have 75 per cent of equine freight going past our gate," Mr Birch said.

At least the same number are flown back into Auckland a year.

Mr Birch said the top-class hub would be purpose-built and would require a partnership between the airport company and the likes of New Zealand Bloodstock, which is owned by Waikato's Vela brothers, who are involved in the Auckland freight service.

Another condition would be being able to build and offer a frequent service, requiring a relationship with an aircraft operator.

Horses travel now on standard freight aircraft, such as DHL planes.

The new venture would provide horse boxes that could be broken down when the horses had left the plane, making it easier for fresh produce, for example, on the return flight to New Zealand.

"The plan depends on the economic loadings and the aircraft.

"There is a bunch of work to be done before we could say we can do it without extending the runway," Mr Birch said.

Hamilton's runway is 2200 metres long and it has the scope to be extended to 3000 metres. Airfreighters are typically Boeing 737s and 757s.

A new Hamilton freight hub would have specialised infrastructure, which Auckland Airport does not have, such as veterinary facilities and stables, Mr Birch said.

Ninety per cent of the equine travellers were racehorses, he said. Auckland now handled 95 per cent of all horses exiting New Zealand.

Waikato Stud, the biggest thoroughbred breeder in New Zealand, spends up to \$200,000 a year airfreighting at least 300 horses, said owner Mark Chittick.

"It would be of immense value, it would be absolutely fantastic. It would make a massive difference to our operation."

Horses dehydrate on trips, and the less time they spend travelling the better.

"We certainly need some improvements if things are to carry on at Auckland [Airport]," Chittick said.

Top trainer Graeme Rogerson, who has racing stables in Hamilton and Sydney, said the Hamilton facility would have to be "up to standard" in all respects.

He would certainly support a new horse transport hub if the Vela brothers were involved, Rogerson said.

Mr Birch said talks with prospective partners were under way and a business case should be ready by the third quarter of this year.

Revenue estimates were not available because the financials would be "highly dependent" on the size of the airport company's investment, and its share of the hub.

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