



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

By Hon. Viliame Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation

UNDERSTANDING AND MITIGATING BIRD STRIKES IN AVIATION

3 November, 2025

Parliament of the Fiji Islands

9:30AM

Suva

Mr. Speaker,
The Honourable Prime Minister,
The Honorable Leader of Opposition, and
Honorable Members of Parliament.

I rise today to address an important aviation safety concern that affects both global and local operations, wildlife hazards, with a specific focus on bird strikes. Wildlife hazards, particularly bird strikes, present significant risks to flight safety, aircraft integrity, and operational efficiency. Managing these risks is critical to ensuring the continued safety of our skies and passengers.

What Are Bird Strikes and Why Do They Matter

Bird strikes occur when birds collide with aircraft, commonly during critical phases of flight such as takeoff and landing. These incidents range in severity from minor damage to catastrophic accidents.

For example, in December 2024, Jeju Air Flight 2216 suffered dual engine failure after a bird strike during takeoff in South Korea, resulting in 179 fatalities. This tragic event highlights the severe dangers posed by bird strikes worldwide.

Closer to home, Fiji Airways recently faced a similar challenge. On October 9, 2025, Fiji Airways Flight FJ450, a Boeing 737-800 registered DQ-FJN, departing Christchurch for Nadi, encountered a flock of pigeons during takeoff. The flight crew responded with professionalism and skill, declaring an emergency situation and establishing a holding pattern approximately 12 nautical miles south of Christchurch. Following the incident, a thorough inspection revealed damage to the aircraft's nose, fuselage, wings, and engines. Six dead pigeons were recovered from the runway. After careful assessment and monitoring, the aircraft safely returned and landed at Christchurch Airport without injury to passengers or crew.

This incident was formally reported to the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji and the New Zealand Civil Aviation Authority in line with international safety regulations under ICAO Annex 13. Fiji Airways' Flight Safety Team has launched an internal investigation to derive lessons and strengthen future mitigation measures.

Financial and Operational Impacts

Bird strikes carry considerable financial burdens. In 2024, Fiji Airways grounded four Boeing 737 aircraft due to bird strikes, with annual costs estimated at FJD \$19.2 million. A single turbine blade damage incident in January 2025 incurred costs of FJD \$4.8 million. These figures reflect the tangible impact on airline operations, maintenance budgets, and passenger services.

Why Are Birds Attracted to Airports

Birds are drawn to airport environments primarily to the availability of food, water and shelter. Key attractants include open drains and standing water

sources, waste disposal sites and rubbish dumps and fruit trees and crops near airport boundaries. These factors create habitats where birds congregate, increasing the likelihood of bird strikes during aircraft operations.

What needs to be done

Effectively managing bird strike risks requires reducing bird attractants near airports by working with local authorities to control land use, waste, and water sources. Regular monitoring of bird activity helps identify high-risk species and periods, with data shared between airlines and airport authorities to alert pilots.

Additionally, training pilots and ground staff to recognize and respond to risks is essential. The use of technology such as bird detection radars and wildlife deterrent devices further improves real-time hazard management and safety.

Collaborative On-the-Ground Management Efforts

In response to the risks posed by bird strikes, Fiji Airports and Fiji Airways have committed to robust and coordinated wildlife hazard management programs. Fiji Airports has developed a comprehensive Wildlife Management Plan that incorporates best practices and international standard, and established an Airport Wildlife Committee to oversee monitoring and mitigation activities at Nadi, Nausori, and other airports.

Personnel including Wildlife Coordinators, Airside Safety Officers, and Airport Environment Officers are tasked with day-to-day hazard management. Key initiatives by Fiji Airports include mapping and mitigating bird attractants within a 5km radius of airports in collaboration

with local authorities, launching environmental sustainability campaigns to raise awareness, and advocating for stronger land-use regulations around airports.

Fiji Airways supports these efforts by sharing real-time bird strike data, conducting DNA analysis of bird remains to identify high-risk species, and enhancing pilot awareness through training and operational guidelines. Together, these proactive measures aim to reduce bird strike risks and improve aviation safety.

National Framework

Recognizing the need for a national approach, Cabinet endorsed the establishment of the National Wildlife Hazard Management Committee for Aviation on August 14, 2025. This committee facilitates cross-sector collaboration among government agencies, aviation authorities, environmental bodies, and local communities.

Its mandate includes promoting awareness, coordinating mitigation efforts, supporting wildlife hazard programs at airports through the airport committee, and ensuring Fiji's compliance with ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices. The committee also oversees the mandatory reporting of wildlife strikes to ICAO's International Bird Strike Information System, strengthening Fiji's role in the global aviation safety network.

Conclusion

Honourable Speaker, bird strikes are a growing global challenge with potentially devastating consequences. The recent Jeju Air tragedy and Fiji Airways' own incident remind us of the constant vigilance required to safeguard our skies. Through the dedicated efforts of Fiji Airports, Fiji

Airways, and the newly formed National Wildlife Hazard Management Committee, we are advancing our capacity to manage and mitigate these risks effectively.

By working collaboratively, investing in technology, raising awareness, and enforcing sound policies, Fiji is committed to protecting aviation safety, our passengers, and our national reputation as a safe hub in the Asia-Pacific region.

Vinaka Vakalevu, Dhanyavaad and Thank You, Mr. Speaker, Sir!