

Australia's Antarctic runway melting

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File photo of a plane on the purpose-built Wilkins glacial blue ice runway in Antarctica. Australia said Wednesday it was searching for a new aircraft landing site for planes supplying its three bases in Antarctica because the current runway is melting.

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Australia has three stations on the icy continent—Casey, Davis and

Mawson—occupied by scientists and support staff, with the Wilkins [runway](#), carved into glacial [blue ice](#), a vital transport link.

But a [melting](#) surface has started to restrict use of the Aus\$45 million (US\$46.4 million) landing strip near Casey and the Australian Antarctic Division said they were looking at alternatives.

They include the ice-free Vestfold Hills near Davis.



The Australian Antarctic research station of Casey lies 65 kms from the purpose-built Wilkins glacial blue ice runway in Antarctica. Meteorological stations have shown a temperature rise of 2 degrees Celsius in the past 50 years in the Antarctic peninsula, which is roughly triple that of the global temperature rise.

"During the first few years since the introduction of Australia's airlink to [Antarctica](#) in 2007/08 our operations have, on occasions, been hampered

by glacial melt at the current Wilkins runway," a spokesperson told AFP.

"The Australian Antarctic Division will investigate a range of alternative or additional landing sites for fixed-wing aircraft near our three stations in Antarctica."

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Planes can only land if the temperature is below minus 5 degrees Celsius.

Instead of the 20 flights a season predicted by the Australian Antarctic Division before the runway opened, just two landed in the 2010/11 season with the runway closed from December to February due to melt.

Four landed last season and six are planned this year.

The Australian bases are also serviced by ship but the journey can take up to two weeks, compared to the 4.5 hour flight from Hobart in Tasmania state.

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