

Concerns raised about Airservices Australia and OneSKY expenses

by Ean Higgins

Airservices Australia has spent considerable sums of money flying staff to France to discuss its \$1.5 billion OneSKY program with the lead contractor, the Paris-based Thales aerospace group, despite Thales having a large operation in Australia to serve its customers here.

An Airservices insider revealed the trips to France and claimed they were one example of profligate spending on the \$1.5bn OneSKY project, which is designed to integrate the nation's civilian and military air traffic control and navigation systems into a single state-of-the-art network.

An Airservices spokesperson said OneSKY was running to schedule for completion by 2021, and that "work currently undertaken is within the approved budget".

Government-owned Airservices has come under scrutiny in a Senate committee over the past year for huge bonuses paid to its executives, and allegations of possible conflicts of interest in its dealings with a Canberra-based group called the International Centre for Complex Project Management.

It emerged that an ICCPM director who has since become its chairman, former RAAF officer Harry Bradford, had as of the middle of last year been paid more than \$1 million by Airservices to negotiate on its behalf with Thales on OneSKY, over a period understood to be about 18 months.

The contractual dealings between Airservices and ICCPM over OneSKY are the subject of an investigation by the Australian National Audit Office, which is due to table its report to parliament in May.

Thales, according to its website, employs about 3200 people in more than 35 sites across Australia, and Thales Australia recorded revenues of \$1bn in 2014.

The Airservices spokesperson would not say why it was necessary to fly Airservices executives to France for discussions when Thales had a very large subsidiary in Australia to serve myriad local clients.

Nor would it supply answers as to how many Airservices executives had travelled to France on how many occasions, by what class of air travel, which hotels they stayed at, or how much had been spent in all.

But iAirservices said:

"Senior executives from Thales, Airservices and Defence meet, from time to time, as part of the negotiation process for the OneSKY Australia program. Meetings generally have taken place in Australia, and on occasion in France.

“All travel is undertaken in accordance with Airservices travel policy, which is consistent with the Australian government’s International Travel Policy with respect to class of airfare, hotels and incidental expenses.”

Airservices has progressively announced contracts with Thales, starting in February last year with agreement that it would develop the new system and start work orders in July that year.

Last month, it signed a contract with Thales for advanced work on software design assurance.

Recently appointed Airservices chief executive, Jason Harfield, had accountability for the “leadership, acquisition and delivery” of OneSKY as executive general manager of future service delivery for two years until August last year.

As revealed last week, Airservices has appointed a senior figure in the Department of Defence, Air Vice Marshal Chris Deeble, to head the OneSKY project from here, reporting to Mr. Harfield.