Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on efforts since the 2017 meeting to establish a stand-alone Regional Aviation Ministers’ meeting focussing on aviation matters of regional importance; and request Transport Ministers to note the scope and purpose of the Regional Aviation Ministers’ meeting to be held in early 2020 in Papua New Guinea, as endorsed by Forum Leaders at their recent meeting in Tuvalu (refer para 56 in 2019 Forum Communique attached).

Background

2. Aviation safety and security is of strategic importance to the region because of its implications on sustainable economic development and the connectivity of The Blue Pacific.

3. Despite this important there has been a loss in visibility of aviation issues and a further inability to pursue collaborative regional initiatives. Aviation matters, particularly in the regulatory context are not currently featured in the regional agenda.

4. The Smaller Island States (SIS) Regional Strategy 2016-2020 endorsed by Leaders in Pohnpei in September 2016 identified Air/Sea Transportation as a priority of shared importance to the sub-grouping; however, the emphasis in the Strategy is on ‘fair and equitable air services agreements’ and on the proper management of upper airspace for SIS, not on strengthening regulatory frameworks to ensure safe and secure air travel. Many issues require the input of larger countries to enable action on specific SIS priorities.

5. At the same time, there is an absence in the region on leading and progressing aviation policy work, and around collaboration on broader aviation initiatives, such as infrastructure development and maintenance support.

6. During the 2017 Transport Ministers’ Meeting, it was highlighted that decisions on aviation-related issues could not be made due to the limitations in current arrangements of the Pacific Aviation Safety Office (PASO), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the Pacific Community (SPC) to assist members on aviation issues. SPC indicated that it was not in position to provide technical assistance due to the absence of dedicated resources and expertise. The Transport Ministers tasked the relevant CROP agencies to dialogue in order to explore options to address transport issues in the Pacific region. This was further discussed by SIS Leaders at their meeting in Apia in 2017 who recognized the urgency of addressing air services and upper airspace management and the importance of addressing these as separate issues. Subsequently, the 2018 SIS Leaders meeting in Nauru removed addressing air services, this is no longer a core activity.

7. Connectivity is also considered an important priority for the region and as a matter of a regional importance. This item will be added to the agenda for a Regional Aviation Ministers meeting.

8. The PASO Council meeting endorsed reestablishment of a Regional Aviation Ministers’ meeting.

9. PIFS, SPC and PASO coordinated their work until SPC’s cessation of all aviation-related work on 31 December 2015 and the end of its aviation programme. PIFS continued oversight on aviation policy work (i.e. upper airspace management, Pacific Islands Air Services Agreement (PIASA)). PASO clearly has a role to play going forward.

10. Within this context, work continues to convene a Regional Aviation Ministers Meeting as part of a pathway to raise the profile of aviation safety and security in the region with Leaders.
Current status

10. Papua New Guinea, who is also the Chair of PASO, has offered to host the Regional Aviation Ministers’ Meeting in early 2020.

11. Work is underway by PIFS in partnership with the PASO in consultation with senior officials of Forum member states to finalise an agenda for the 2020 Regional Aviation Ministers’ Meeting. This agenda will reflect any relevant issues raised within this meeting and other important aviation related matters that have low visibility or have not featured in Leaders’ regional priorities.

Issues

12. Strong state aviation regulatory and enforcement frameworks are essential to maintaining and establishing viable and sustainable connectivity between States and are an essential enabler of economic growth through tourism and trade links. State compliance with aviation safety and security standards is not negotiable. It is an obligation under international treaties entered by most Pacific island states, and a prerequisite for maintaining international and domestic air services. Without safe and secure systems in place, these air services could not continue.

13. The role of the PASO is misunderstood and given recent accidents has highlighted how important aviation safety and security oversight, and the role of PASO is as a technical body for aviation certification, training and security. As a regional agency, a CROP agency, and with Leaders establishing a purpose-built team of experts for the region (when they established PASO) there still remains a need to address aviation safety and security systems in accordance with international requirements, as endorsed by all 193 Contracting States to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Most Pacific Island States are below international requirements and this is ultimately contributing to barriers with economic growth in the region. There are also several other key opportunities for collaborative and unified approaches that could potentially benefit the region; however, there is currently no vehicle to engage political on these issues and gain consensus by Leaders.

14. It is anticipated that with the reestablishment of the Regional Aviation Ministers’ Meeting, there will be increased workload around a range of aviation issues, some regulatory in nature that are within PASO’s mandate, and some that are not.

15. There are further opportunities for member states to work collaboratively to assist small and economically disadvantaged Pacific Island countries to improve their aviation regulatory environment in the ‘Pacific way’ through increased regional leadership.

16. The proposed scope of an initial Regional Ministers’ Meeting is:

17. *The Pacific Islands Civil Aviation Safety and Security Treaty (PICASST)*: the PICASST was fit for purpose when it was first drafted in 7 August 2004; however, shifts in the geopolitical environment since then have called for increased regulatory requirements and in turn, demands on PASO and its member states. The current form of the PICASST places limitations on PASO to fully support members in meetings these demands. A review of the PICASST would be timely and beneficial to all relevant stakeholders. Through this process the role of the PASO should be clarified and its mandate strengthened to absorb any added responsibilities resulting from the convening of an Regional Aviation Ministers’ meeting.

18. *Beijing Declaration Commitments*: recognising one of the key discussion points at the meeting of Director Generals of Civil Aviation in Fiji on 22-26 October 2018, member states will require additional support from PASO to implement the commitments that have been made under the Declaration. This support is not currently within the remit of PASO.

19. *ICAO Pacific Aviation Needs Analysis Study*: In line with ICAO’s No Country Left Behind (NCLB) initiative in support of achieving the 2030 Agenda, ICAO is carrying out an Aviation Needs Analysis for Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) to: (i) outline the aviation safety, air navigation and aviation security challenges faced by PSIDS; and (ii) identify potential options to be further explored that could address these challenges.
The study will identify the unique circumstances that exist within the Pacific region, considering the need to ensure aviation safety oversight. It will examine how aviation contributes to sustainable development of the PSIDS, in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the SAMOA Pathway, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the Paris Agreement, and the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP). It is also expected that this initiative will build upon work already initiated by different partners, including the Work Bank’s Pacific Aviation Investment Program (PAIP); the Pacific Aviation Safety Office (PASO), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB)’s technical assistance report – Institutional Strengthening for Aviation Regulation.

The study is scheduled to conclude in 2019, with the ICAO Council meeting in late 2019 to determine the outcomes of the study. Recommendations that come from the ICAO will almost certainly require consideration and consensus of Forum Leaders and their Aviation Ministers.

20. **Improved regulatory aviation frameworks**: There is focused effort in the region on aviation infrastructure improvement projects in addition to introducing new airlines or new aircraft to increase growth and exploit tourism opportunities. Aviation regulatory frameworks, which themselves are fundamental enablers of economic growth and a critical component of sustainable tourism industries, are not accorded the same focus or effort. For passenger numbers, employment opportunities, and Gross Domestic Product to increase, member States require strong and enforceable regulatory frameworks.

21. **Achieving benefit realisation of donor funded projects**: In PASO’s case this means taking full advantage of the World Bank-funded PASO reform project and the New Zealand-funded ICAO Universal Safety Oversight Audit Programme (USOAP) project. In practice, this requires obtaining member State consensus and collaboration to enable the targeted work programs to be successfully implemented.

22. **Other Matters**: There is a need for an appropriate platform at senior officials and ministerial level to table and discuss any aviation-related issues of concern to a member country and/or the region which may or may not require Leaders’ attention.

23. PIFS is currently the depositary of the PICASST. As such, it is proposed that it would facilitate an initial meeting of Aviation Ministers with technical support provided by PASO. This is premised on an understanding that subsequent meeting will be led and managed by PASO in a governance arrangement similar to the meetings of Fisheries Ministers and Education Ministers and their corresponding CROP agency.

24. Transport Ministers and Officials are invited to raise additional matters that might usefully form part of the scope of the initial, and future, Regional Aviation Minister’s meetings.

**Recommendations**

25. Transport Ministers are invited to:
   i. **Note** the preparatory work underway between the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Aviation Safety Office to convene a Regional Aviation Minister’s meeting in early 2020, to be hosted by Papua New Guinea;
   ii. **Note** the purpose and scope of the first Regional Aviation Minister’s meeting;
   iii. **Agree** to communicate any additional aviation-related matters to be conveyed to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, for inclusion on the agenda of the 2020 Regional Aviation Ministers’ meeting.

[16 August 2019]