**[Global warming hits Australia's $46m Antarctic airfield](http://www.google.com/url?sa=X&q=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/global-warming-hits-australias-46m-antarctic-airfield/story-e6frg6nf-1226013136866&ct=ga&cad=CAEQAhgAIAAoATAAOABA4LCs6wRIAVAAWABiAmVu&cd=Y45Nssa3NEg&usg=AFQjCNGryivxu-URdZunP2Zqb9k82QKpKA)**

Paul Cleary, The Australian, Feb. 28, 2011

**AUSTRALIA'S $46 million airfield in the Antarctic, which was opened just three years ago, may have become a short-lived victim of climate change, as unusually warm weather this summer has prevented flights landing there.**

So far this summer, only one Airbus A319 flight has landed on Wilkins runway, 70km southeast of Casey station, compared with 29 over the last two summers. The first flight managed to leave Hobart only last Thursday.

Wilkins runway began operating in January 2008 when then environment minister Peter Garrett joined the first official flight. The airfield was designed to overcome the long sea voyage for personnel working at Casey station. But this year's experience has raised doubts about the long-term viability of the airstrip. Instead of landing at Wilkins, Australian Antarctic Division staff have landed at the US base, McMurdo, and then been ferried by smaller aircraft to Casey.

A spokeswoman for the division said the combination of warmer temperatures and increased UV strength was affecting the runway. Even flights to the US base have been limited to the colder part of the day, she said. McMurdo base is located at 72 degrees latitude, compared with 67 for Casey station. "Being that much further south is advantageous in these warmer-than-usual times," the spokeswoman said.

But the comment tends to reinforce speculation that another airfield may need to be built further south of Casey station. When asked what options were being considered to address this problem, the spokeswoman was vague. "At the end of each season, the Australian Antarctic Division reviews all its operations with a view to making improvements," she said. "Technology changes all the time and we are open to looking at a range of options."

The plan to build the airfield was commissioned by the Howard government in 2005. It took more than two years to carve the runway out of the ice. Then environment minister Malcolm Turnbull was scheduled to join a test flight in early 2007, but his flight was cancelled because of equipment failure. It wasn't until February the following year, with Mr Garrett as minister, that the first official flight took place.

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR (not published)**

Dear Editor,

Your piece [**Global warming** hits Australia's $46m Antarctic airfield](http://www.google.com/url?sa=X&q=http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/global-warming-hits-australias-46m-antarctic-airfield/story-e6frg6nf-1226013136866&ct=ga&cad=CAEQAhgAIAAoATAAOABA4LCs6wRIAVAAWABiAmVu&cd=Y45Nssa3NEg&usg=AFQjCNGryivxu-URdZunP2Zqb9k82QKpKA) describes technical problems at the Davies Base airfield that are consistent with incompetent planning.

In contrast, there is not a shred of evidence that the summer warmth you mention has anything to do with human-caused global warming, and using such determinedly misleading headlines does nothing to improve the level of public debate on an important topic.

Yours etc.

*Bob Carter*