

Stay Clear of Marsden Point

The people who work at the country's only oil refinery say aircraft busting the restricted airspace above them are flying into possible catastrophe.

Open the C1 Visual Navigation Chart, and you'll find at about 35°50'S and 174°30'E, airspace designated R100.

That means no aircraft can fly lower than 3500 ft amsl within a one kilometre radius centred on the tallest structure in the restricted area – a 120 m high four-chimney flue – at Marsden Point oil refinery.

Despite that, four or five aircraft a year, particularly in the summer, stray into the restricted area, flying – according to refinery workers – between 2000 and 500 ft amsl.

Damian Southorn, the Emergency Services and Incident Response Manager for Refining NZ – the Marsden Point operator – suspects the pilots want a closer look at the refinery itself, or the surrounding area.

"The harbour is very picturesque, the coastline beautiful, Mt Manaia is close by and then there's the working port. There's a lot to see from an aircraft.

"But the restriction is there for safety. The danger to overhead aircraft could be catastrophic, should the plant need to quickly depressurise, with a sudden release of gas from the flare stack.

"We also have thermals surrounding the plant, generated by the fans used to cool the hot pipes.

"We're making fuel here. It's an inherently hazardous activity that relies on a controlled work environment with good safety procedures. But there's not much we can do about someone flying in breach of the restriction."

The CAA's Regulatory Investigations Unit is currently looking at an incident where an aircraft allegedly flew low, across the refinery, close to the 90 m flare stack.

The company's External Affairs Manager, Greg McNeill, says not

only are the lives of the 550 refinery workers put at risk each time an aircraft breaches the restricted airspace, it also potentially puts the local community and the wider economy at risk.

"Marsden Point is a critical, strategic piece of energy infrastructure. It produces all the country's jet fuel, all its fuel oil for shipping, nearly 80 per cent of its diesel, and about half of its petrol," he says.

Damian Southorn says Air New Zealand, with flights in and out every day, the local helicopter rescue service, local commercial operators and most local recreational aircraft all keep out of the restricted area.

"But visitors to the area might not be so aware of the restriction nor the reason for it. Generally it's recreational single-engine aircraft, helicopters, and microlights.

"If they want the best view of the refinery, it's actually at about 3500 ft and about one and a half kilometres away. It's a better look than from right over the top."

Damian says if a pilot has to fly within the restricted area, they must apply for authorization from Refining NZ.

"A local UAV operator who has to fly regularly within the restricted airspace follows the rules to a 'T'," he says.

"They do aerial survey work for Northport (the port company) and always apply in writing at least seven days in advance, further confirming on the day prior to flying operations.

"Notification of the proposed flight is then disseminated through the refinery, with authorization granted on the basis that the UAV operator will adhere to a strict list of caveats.

"So authorization can be sought by a pilot or operator wanting to fly in the R100 airspace but there is a process.

"What they certainly cannot do, is just wander on through." ■