

Safety fears over aircrew cuts

By **MATTHEW BENNS**

AUSTRALIAN airlines are pushing to reduce the number of cabin crew on passenger planes.

But the flight attendants' union says cutting the ratio of one cabin crew member for every 36 passengers to one for 50 passengers would put lives at risk in an emergency.

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority has set up a project team to review the proposal, which was last reviewed and rejected by Federal Parliament six years ago.

Jo-Ann Davidson, secretary of the Flight Attendants Association of

Don't lower standards, urge flight attendants

Australia's domestic division, said: "The FAAA can see no safety reasons to lower the standard. From our point of view, there is no argument that will convince the FAAA that lowering the benchmark is somehow safer."

The airlines have argued that Australia should come into line with the internationally accepted ratio of one cabin crew member for every 50 passengers.

But Ms Davidson said: "When we

have a safety standard in Australia that is the envy of the world, why do we look overseas for change? The driving force appears to be commercial and cost benefits rather than any safety consideration."

Ms Davidson added that cabin crew were also responsible for the in-flight safety of passengers in the event of security or air-rage incidents. In 2003, two Qantaslink cabin crew were seriously hurt when a passenger brandishing two

wooden stakes, an aerosol can and a lighter attempted to hijack a Boeing 717 over Melbourne. The plane was carrying four cabin crew and two pilots.

"Less crew on board means less safety professionals to deal with on-board safety incidents," Ms Davidson said.

The authority has already granted a number of exemptions to the one-in-36 ratio for the most popular planes on domestic routes, the

Boeing 737-800 and Airbus A320 aircraft, which allows for a crew of four rather than five.

An authority spokesman said draft rules would be released next month. "No changes will be made that will compromise safety in any way," he said.

A Qantas spokeswoman confirmed the company was part of the working group looking into increasing cabin crew ratios. "This amendment to the order would mean greater flexibility for cabin crew levels in the event of disruptions to flights where there is no cabin crew base to draw upon," she said.