Western Australia’s major regional airline, Skywest, has commenced flights to the Territory with the first plane arriving in Darwin today Chief Minister and Tourism Minister, Clare Martin, said.

Greeting the first flight at Darwin Airport, Ms Martin said that the start of Skywest flights - providing a new link with WA - is great news for the tourism industry.

“We welcome Skywest to the Territory and believe that an additional service linking us with WA will provide a boost to tourism and create significant business opportunities,” she said.

“This service will encourage more passengers to travel to and throughout the Territory - especially with a direct Darwin-Broome leg now operational - and the benefits will be felt throughout the NT.

“The Perth/Broome/Darwin service will begin with two flights a week, each carrying 97 passengers, building to three flights per week in May.

“That is a total of 291 seats a week and, according to Skywest, will provide an estimated injection to the NT of over $4.5M in direct expenditure.”

Ms Martin met with Skywest in February to discuss opportunities for service expansion into the Territory.

“Government has increased the tourism budget by $27.5 million and believe that the extra funding, now available for marketing and other initiatives, will help make more tourism ventures and air services viable,” she said.

“Already this year we have seen the start of The Ghan service, an increase in cruise ships, the first SilkAir charter flights to Darwin, new Virgin flights to Melbourne and the announcement of new Qantas flights from Melbourne to Ayers Rock.”

Ms Martin said that with Australian Airlines beginning its Singapore/Darwin/Cairns service next month and discount airline Jetstar announcing plans to fly to the Territory, 2004 really looks set to be a vastly improved year.

“Government and NT Tourist Commission have been extremely pro-active in attracting both domestic and international airlines and later this month, NTTC Managing Director Maree Tetlow and I will travel to China to meet with several more airlines,” she said.