

U.N. Agency Proposes Limits on Airlines' Carbon Emissions

By Jad Mouawad and Coral Davenport, NewYorkTimes | FEB. 9, 2016



An air traffic controller at the Newark airport. New regulations are being sought to curb airline emissions. Credit Julio Cortez/Associated Press

After more than six years of negotiations, the global aviation industry agreed on Monday to the first binding limits on carbon dioxide emissions, tackling the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gas pollution.

The deal is the latest in a series of international efforts to address climate change. Until now, airplanes had not been included in any international climate change deals, like the recent Paris Agreement, or the Montreal Protocol, expected to be completed later this year.

The proposed new rules, announced in Montreal by the International Civil Aviation Organization, the United Nations' aviation agency, would apply for all new airplanes delivered after 2028.¹

¹ Thus, the airlines will continue to replace their current fleet with the latest slightly more efficient aircraft, but will have no obligation to improve the efficiency of the fleet as it exists at the end of year 2027. If the airlines handle this to maximize profit and minimize responsible environmental obligation, they will make sure their fleet is fully upgraded in 2027, enabling them to delay further (more efficient) aircraft acquisitions until 2040 and beyond.

Airlines account for about 2 percent of global emissions² — about the same as Germany. But many analysts think the emissions could triple by the middle of the century given the expected growth in air travel over the next decades.

It took little time, though, for the announcement to set off a debate over how effective the proposed rules would be.

Some environmental groups, pointing to the airline industry's close involvement in crafting the deal, said the proposed rules were too weak and failed to include aircraft currently in use.

But advocates of the deal, including the Obama administration, praised it, saying that it was an important first step and that it tackled one of the most intractable rifts over reducing carbon emissions.

“This is another example of the administration's deep commitment to working with the international community on policies that will reduce harmful carbon pollution worldwide,” Michael Huerta, head of the Federal Aviation Administration, said in a statement.

In a statement, the White House said that “without additional action, emissions from the aviation sector are projected to grow by nearly 50 percent.”

The proposed rules signaled the first time that the aviation sector had been given emissions standards, just as cars and commercial trucks now have.

The new standards would require a 4 percent reduction in fuel consumption of new aircraft starting in 2028 compared with 2015 deliveries. They also set new limits for airplanes in production that are delivered after 2023. Depending on the size of the aircraft, actual reductions would be from zero to 11 percent, with a bigger emphasis on larger commercial airplanes, according to analysts with the International Council on Clean Transportation.

Before they become binding, the new standards must be formally adopted by the civil aviation council of 36 member states, in June this year, and then endorsed by the council's assembly in October. They would then need to be enacted by each member state in its national legislation or regulation, although countries have the option to adopt even stricter restrictions on emissions.

The Obama administration last year issued a [legal finding](#) that aviation emissions are a threat to human health because of their contribution to global warming. That finding initiated a requirement under the Clean Air Act that the government release new regulations to curb airplane emissions.

Because of the global nature of the industry, however, the administration said at the time it would wait for the new rules before drafting its own standard.

² This number is debated; some believe it is closer to 4%. Regardless, one simple fact about air travel is that, whether it is for business or pleasure, it is one of our most discretionary and arbitrary forms of travel. We ignore the substantial carbon impact/cost so as to gain a personal time-savings benefit.

The standards should cut carbon emissions more than 650 million metric tons³ between 2020 and 2040, the equivalent to removing over 140 million cars from the road for a year,⁴ the White House said.

For some environmentalists, though, that was not enough.

“The standard as proposed is not going to make a dent in the emissions growth curve of airlines, and that is really deplorable,” said Vera Pardee, a lawyer with the Center for Biological Diversity. “It’s just unfair for an industry as large as the airline industry not to be called to account on their contribution to climate change.”

Automakers, by comparison, are required to nearly double their fuel economy by 2025.

Ms. Pardee’s group called on the Obama administration to implement far more stringent regulations than those put forth by the aviation group.

“We think it’s absolutely incumbent on E.P.A. to implement stronger standards,” she said.

Such a move would most likely draw fierce resistance from the airline industry, which has stressed the importance of having a single standard across international airspaces. But if the United States, the largest aviation market in the world, were to issue a tougher rule, “it would be a catalyst” for other countries to follow, Ms. Pardee said.

Limiting aviation emissions remains one of Mr. Obama’s major initiatives to combat global warming, following similar new emissions rules on heavy-duty trucks and power plants that were unveiled by the E.P.A. last year. But it is unlikely that the administration could complete work on such a complex aviation rule in the 11 months before Mr. Obama leaves office, leaving the final call to the next president.

The accord won praise from the Environmental Defense Fund, which said it was a positive first step but that more effort was required to limit the growth in emissions. Such a goal could be achieved by establishing market-based measures to cap emissions and drive down pollution.

Others, like the International Council on Clean Transportation, said the agreement would ensure, at a minimum, that technological gains would help limit the industry’s projected emissions growth.

“Given the substantial lead time for the standards, along with anticipated fuel efficiency gains for new aircraft types already in development by manufacturers, the standards will serve primarily to prevent backsliding in emissions,” the group said in a statement.

Because of the size of its air travel market, the largest in the world, the United States has a big stake in the outcome of the talks. According to a [report](#) by the Center on Biological Diversity,

³ 650 million metric tons in 20 years is 650/20 equals a 31.5 million metric tons per year reduction. But take a look at actual (estimated) CO₂ emissions figures by the aviation industry, which the Center for Biological Diversity estimates at 43 gigatons in 34 years (2016-2050), thus an annual average of 1,265 million metric tons per year. In this light, the expected savings come to 31.5/1,265 equals just 2.5%.

⁴ Do the math: if this is equivalent to 140 million cars removed for a year, but over a 20-year window, that means the actual annual savings is equivalent to permanently removing 140/20 equals 7 million cars. Wikipedia says there are currently 255 million passenger vehicles in the U.S., making this seemingly impressive '7 million car' reduction not so impressive, at roughly 3% ... especially when annualized, which equates to a reduction of roughly 0.1% per year.

the United States accounts for half of all carbon dioxide emissions from airplanes around the world. And airplanes currently account for 11 percent of transportation emissions in the United States.

Following the E.P.A.'s finding in June, the agency said that any domestic rules would be at least as tough as any I.C.A.O. standard.

The new aviation rules could force plane makers like Airbus and Boeing to end production of some of their least-efficient airplanes, and would encourage engine makers to develop even-more fuel efficient engines.

Airlines have long argued that any emissions limit needs to apply globally. The opposition to regional standards helped scuttle an earlier attempt by the European Union to include aviation in a 2012 emissions trading scheme.

As it headed into the latest talks, however, the European Union was calling for less ambitious goals than those sought by the United States, according to analysts who have followed the discussions closely.

The talks at the council are running under a twin-track approach. A first set of rules lays out new fuel efficiency standards for planes. Another would make airlines pay for the cost of carbon dioxide through a market-based system. That second phase is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

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