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EPA urged to establish airline emission standards

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A coalition of environmental groups and a handful of state and regional officials filed petitions Wednesday with the federal government, urging that aircraft emission standards be established to reduce greenhouse gases.

The groups called on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to look at emission standards for aircraft in much the same way the agency has set standards for cars and trucks, a move the airlines say is unnecessary.

"We're urging the EPA to act boldly and act now," said Dianne Saenz, a spokeswoman for Oceana, which filed the petition along with EarthJustice, Friends of the Earth and the Center for Biological Diversity. Backing the petitions were the attorneys general of California, Connecticut and New Mexico, along with the city of New York, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, the District of Columbia and the South Coast (Southern California) Air Quality Management District.

The airline industry said the standards are not needed, especially for commercial aircraft,



CHRIS RANK/Bloomberg News

Environmentalists argue that carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and water vapor have a greater impact when emitted by airliners in the air than when they are released at ground level.

because market forces already drive carriers to make their fleets as fuel-efficient as possible.

"We're not afraid to have EPA look at whether a standard is needed," said Nancy Young, vice president of environmental affairs for the Air Transport Association, the trade group representing major U.S. carriers. "But if the airlines have any hope of eking out a profit, they already have to fly as fuel-efficient as possible."

Young said commercial aviation contributes only about 2 percent

of total greenhouse emissions in the United States. She said the carriers have realized a 103 percent improvement in fuel efficiency since 1978 and are looking for an additional 30 percent in the next two decades.

The environmental coalition said that all aircraft — commercial, private and military — account for about 12 percent of carbon dioxide emissions from all U.S. transportation sources. That's about 3 percent of the nation's total carbon dioxide emissions.

The United States, the group said, is responsible for about half the worldwide carbon dioxide emissions from all aircraft.

Saenz acknowledged that aircraft emissions represent a relatively small part of the emissions problem, but she said all reductions must be considered.

“They’re dwarfed in just general levels by large oceangoing ships and cars and trucks,” she said.

Aircraft emit carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and water vapor that forms condensation trails at high altitudes. Together, these emissions have a greater global warming impact than if the same emissions were released at ground level, the environmentalists argue.

Wednesday’s move comes as commercial carriers cut capacity and freeze jobs in an effort to trim costs as fuel costs soar.

A spokesman for Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines said the carrier has already instituted numerous programs to reduce fuel consumption in its 440-airplane fleet, including installing lighter seats, using more efficient landing approaches and installing winglets to increase mileage.

“One of the greatest things Delta can do to give back to the environment is to burn less fuel,” Delta spokesman Kent Landers said. “Every year we burn less fuel than we did the year before.”

Klaus Goersch, vice president for flight operations for Orlando-based AirTran Airways, said the use of winglets — curved wingtips — has cut fuel consumption about 3 percent to 4 percent. The airline is installing the curved wing tip on its Boeing 737s.

“We do have one of the youngest and most fuel-efficient fleets in the world,” Goersch said.

He said the carrier, which uses Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport as its main hub, has also cut fuel consumption by instructing planes to use only one engine for most ground operations and through the use of in-flight computers to maximize fuel use.

“Cost is one issue,” he said, “but you also want to be a good neighbor.”

Despite all the improvements, environmentalists argue that greenhouse gas emissions from U.S. aircraft could increase by 60 percent over the next two decades because of increased traffic.