

The Salt Lake Tribune

DECEMBER 4, 2007

Eco-groups warn of pollution from commercial jets

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Commercial airlines are dirty and getting dirtier in their contributions to global warming, a coalition of environmental groups, states and local governments charge.

In a petition to be filed today, California is leading the call for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to begin regulating an industry blamed for 3 percent of America's greenhouse gas emissions and projected to emit 60 percent more by 2025 as flight demand soars. The airlines say they don't need government to tell them that fuel efficiency is important, and they're pursuing efficiency and alternative fuels.

"We're already driven to do it," said Air Transport Association environmental vice president Nancy Young, noting that fuel costs have spurred a 103 percent airline fuel efficiency improvement since 1978.

That's not fast enough when projected passenger demand worldwide is outstripping technological advances, according to environmental groups who today will file their own EPA petition echoing California's demand.

"They're slowly improving fuel efficiency while at the same time air traffic goes up fast," said Eric Bilsky, an attorney with Oceana, one of the petitioning environmental

groups. The signatory groups and governments will wait for EPA's response before deciding whether to sue to force regulation, Bilsky said.

An EPA official on Tuesday said the agency awaited the petitions and had no comment, except that the United States has invested \$37 billion on climate change science and tax incentives.

In Utah, an analysis based on Federal Aviation Administration numbers found jet fuel consumption in 2005 translated to 2.9 million metric tons of greenhouse gases, said Brock LeBaron, a technical analysis manager in the Division of Air Quality. That was 4.2 percent of the state's total output of the gases widely blamed from global warming.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates air traffic will rise 5 percent a year worldwide at the same time that efficiency - largely achieved through more aerodynamic planes with cleaner engines - improves by 2 percent a year. Domestically, air traffic rises 3.5 percent a year. The result is a dramatic increase in carbon dioxide and ozone emissions at the same time that other sectors of the U.S. economy expect to cut back, Bilsky said.

Earthjustice attorney Alice Thomas said EPA has a new mandate to deal with greenhouse gases, and airlines aren't exempt. The U.S. Supreme Court last spring ruled that greenhouse gases are pollutants

covered by the federal Clean Air Act. Regulations similar to automobile fuel-efficiency standards are in order, Thomas said.

"They're required to do so if they find that these emissions are reasonably expected to harm human health and the environment," she said.

Among health effects are longer heat-stroke seasons in the Midwestern and Northeastern United States, and greater prevalence of respiratory distress, she said.

Gov. Jon Huntsman's energy adviser said she expects Utah will address the issue of aviation emissions once EPA sets up national guidelines. The federal government will do that in response to the Supreme Court ruling, and states will follow the guidelines in building their own greenhouse gas programs, adviser Dianne Nielson said. The question is whether the rules will be as stringent as the petitioners want.

"The issue will certainly get addressed ... because there are greenhouse gas emissions from airplanes," Nielson said. "How it gets addressed - what EPA decides to do - is another question."

The petitioners seek mandatory improvements in fuel efficiency over time, whether by engine improvements, weight reductions, more aerodynamic designs or operational improvements such as less engine idling. They also want airlines to use alternative fuels.

Young, of the airline trade association, said market forces already are bringing innovation. Last year industry groups and government agencies formed the Commercial Aviation Alternative Fuels Initiative to research fuels. Alternatives may take time to develop because, for instance, ethanol freezes at altitude.

The airlines also are pushing Congress for a new satellite system to replace the aging radar traffic controls, she said. The existing system sends planes on roundabout routes and leaves them circling cities at times. A satellite air traffic control system could cut emissions by 15 percent, she said.

Carbon dioxide emissions worldwide add up to potentially disastrous climate change that threatens everything from New York City's drinking supply (drought) to California's homes (wildfire) and crops (pests), the petition spearheaded by California Attorney General Jerry Brown says. And scientists believe high-altitude emissions contribute more to warming, the government said.

"In short, our past and current greenhouse gas emissions have pushed us to a climatic 'tipping point,'" the petition. "If we continue our business-as-usual emissions trajectory, dangerous climate change will become unavoidable."

Representatives of the signatory state and local governments did not return phone calls on Tuesday, but Brown's office announced a press conference scheduled for today. The signers represent California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, New York City and California's South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Environmental groups joining in a second petition include Earthjustice, Oceana, Friends of the Earth and the Center for Biological Diversity.