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Which Airlines Kill the Most Polar Bears?

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Every time I see an airplane overhead, I think about polar bears. These amazing animals are being driven to the edge of extinction's crumbling cliff by rising Arctic temperatures and melting sea ice -- and every plane trip does a little bit to bring that extinction closer.

That's because aviation is one of America's fastest-growing sources of carbon pollution, a key driver of the global climate crisis. And that crisis is pushing polar bears, along with wildlife around the planet (and human beings) toward disaster.

But airlines seem determined to block every effort to fight this problem. This week, the International Civil Aviation Organization is taking up aviation greenhouse gas pollution yet again at a meeting in Montreal. Because of industry pressure, this special United Nations agency, tasked back in 1997 with tackling carbon pollution from airplanes, has yet to agree on any significant and binding measures to protect our climate.

The good news? We can do a lot to reduce airplanes' greenhouse emissions, judging from a ground-breaking new aviation pollution report card released recently by the highly respected International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT).

The report found a 26 percent gap between the most and least fuel-efficient airlines serving the U.S. domestic market. Alaska Airlines was the most fuel-efficient, according to the council's ranking of the 15 mainline domestic carriers operating in the United States. American Airlines and Allegiant were the least efficient.

To put it another way: Even after the ICCT's aviation experts adjusted for different types of business operations and networks, the dirtiest airlines used far more fuel than the most-efficient airlines to deliver a comparable level of transport service. And the more fuel you use, the more damage you do to the climate.

That finding blows a massive hole in the airline industry's claim to already be doing everything possible to cut greenhouse gas pollution. Airlines, of course, have long argued that fuel costs force them to operate as efficiently as possible -- but the ICCT report shows that dramatic greenhouse pollution reductions are clearly feasible.

The ICCT report also sends a clear message to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which has utterly failed to address the airline industry's massive greenhouse gas pollution problem.

Fed up with federal inaction, our organization and other environmental groups filed a lawsuit in 2011 to force the EPA to set aviation greenhouse gas pollution standards. A federal judge quickly ruled that the EPA must address climate-harming emissions from aircraft under the Clean Air Act. But two years later, the agency has still not finished the first step in the rule-making process.

That has the change. We need strong federal action to protect our climate from aviation's growing pollution problem. The EPA has to set common-sense rules that push inefficient airlines to curb their emissions.

Keep in mind that aviation accounts for about 12 percent of carbon dioxide emissions from the U.S. transportation sector and is one of the fastest-growing sources of carbon pollution, rising 3 percent to 4 percent a year.

Yet America's woefully inefficient airline industry has had the chutzpah to pull every dirty trick possible to sabotage European and international efforts to curb airplane emissions.

We need to take every opportunity to reduce the pollution driving a climate change crisis that's growing more acute by the year. Our planet is now on track for as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit of warming by century's end unless we quickly reduce greenhouse pollution, according to the draft National Climate Assessment, a federal scientific report released earlier this year.

As temperatures rise, we'll face more and more danger from chaotic extreme weather. Global warming has already increased the risk from some types of weather-related disasters, including last year's brutal heat wave in America, according to a key scientific report released recently by scientists from around the world. And climate change will increase the risk of destructive thunderstorms and violent tornadoes across much of the United States in the decades ahead, according to a new study.

Starting tomorrow, the EPA could begin the process of regulating airline emissions under the Clean Air Act. This potent law has successfully reduced other types of harmful air pollution for four decades. Recently created Clean Air Act rules for cars and trucks nearly doubled their fuel efficiency, and the EPA needs to create efficiency standards for airplanes as soon as possible.

If we're going to preserve a livable planet -- for polar bears or people -- we need to seize every opportunity to cut carbon pollution. And we need every polluter to do its part -- including the airline industry.

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