Energy & Environment

E.P.A. Takes Step to Cut Emissions From Planes

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The Obama administration said on Wednesday that it would take the first step toward regulating greenhouse gas emissions from airplanes, but it acknowledged it would most likely take years before stringent standards are enacted.

The Environmental Protection Agency said that emissions from airplanes endanger human health because of their contribution to global warming. This finding does not impose specific new requirements on airlines yet, but it requires the agency to develop the rules, as it has done for motor vehicles and power plants.

Given the extended timetable of the rule-making process, and the lobbying by the airlines that international regulations should apply to all the carriers, it is almost impossible that airplane emissions rules will

Cutting aircraft emissions is among the administration's efforts to curb global warming. Credit LM Otero/Associated Press

be completed during the Obama administration. The legal obligation for completing work on the airplane pollution rules would then fall to the next president.

The announcement represents the latest of Mr. Obama's major initiatives to combat global warming. Next week, the agency is expected to propose new rules on emissions from heavy-duty trucks, and in August it is expected to announce new rules to rein in power plant pollution.

The E.P.A. said it would also wait for current international negotiations on limiting carbon emissions in the aviation industry before publishing its final rule. Those discussions, which are taking place within the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency charged with aviation rules, began in 2009 and are expected to be completed in February 2016.

Christopher Grundler, director of the E.P.A.'s Office of Transportation and Air Quality, said the agency intended to work closely with international authorities on developing a standard for regulating airline emissions worldwide. But he did not say whether the agency's emissions standards would be more stringent than international ones. The agency said today it would be seeking public comments on those standards.

"Our No. 1 goal is to secure a meaningful international standard," he said. "There are sound environmental reasons to do so. An international policy would secure far more greenhouse gas emissions reductions than a domestic-only plan."

But environmental groups fear that International Civil Aviation Organization — which works in close consultation with airlines, as well as the E.P.A. — will propose a weak standard, and are already urging the United States to move faster with a stringent domestic standard.

"Airplane carbon pollution is skyrocketing, but the E.P.A. is still dodging responsibility for curbing this climate threat," said Vera Pardee, senior counsel and supervising lawyer at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Passing the buck to an international organization that's virtually run by the airline industry won't protect our planet from these rapidly growing emissions."

Deborah Lapidus, director of the Flying Clean campaign, an effort by a coalition of environmental groups, said that the E.P.A. had authority to regulate domestic airline emissions immediately, and that such a standard would provide a road map for the international standards. United States airlines account for about a third of all aircraft global emissions.

Without limits, aviation emissions are set to double by the end of the decade.

"The airlines have a responsibility to do their part on climate change just like every other industry, and E.P.A. needs to hold them to that," Ms. Lapidus said.

Republicans, for their part, also attacked the E.P.A. announcement, calling it another example of what they have criticized as Mr. Obama's regulatory overreach.

"The sky is the limit when it comes to how much of the U.S. economy the E.P.A. wants to control," said Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee. "Such regulations would increase the price of airfare for Americans and harm our domestic carriers. Over the last 50 years, the fuel efficiency of jetliners has increased by 70 percent. Incentives are already in place to make air travel more energy efficient."

I.C.A.O. members are required to adopt any international standards completed by the international organization, according to the E.P.A. Wednesday's finding, the agency said, was part of its preparation for any domestic rules that are "of at least equivalent stringency as the anticipated I.C.A.O." carbon dioxide standard.

A final rule will also be legally binding and a future administration will have to act on it, unless challenged in court. But there is a strong legal precedent for these so-called endangerment findings to be upheld.

The airline industry contends that it has already worked aggressively to reduce fuel use and increase efficiency, and that demands to do even more could raise costs. Already,

airlines are looking into new technologies and alternatives like carbon-neutral — but expensive — biofuels.

In their drive to reduce fuel costs, airlines have turned to a variety of strategies, like taxiing with a single engine, fitting winglets to improve plane aerodynamics, or using lighter material for seats, galleys or in-flight magazines. Since every pound matters, some have cut back on the ice they bring on board.

Each 5.5 pounds of weight reduced on an airplane means a one-ton reduction in carbon emissions per year, according to calculations by the International Air Transport Association.

These rules should be enforced on private planes as well. One of the biggest pollution problems we face is the increase of sociopathic...

But making big cuts in greenhouse gas emissions is a hard task. The industry's efforts to improve fuel efficiency and reduce carbon emissions have been more than offset by the growth of the aviation sector around the world.

Aviation accounts for about 2 percent of global emissions, but it is among the fastest-growing sources of global greenhouse gas emissions as air travel becomes more affordable and more people travel around the world. By 2020, international aviation emissions could be 70 percent higher than in 2005, even if fuel efficiency improves by 2 percent a year, according to estimates cited by the European Commission.

Given the global nature of the business, airlines have argued that the rules should be global. In 2012, the European Union sought to force foreign carriers to participate in its emissions trading scheme. The move was thwarted by the United States, China and other nations, which said they would retaliate if their airlines were forced to do so.

The Obama administration said it would bar United States airlines from taking part.

Commercial airlines have voluntarily committed to limit the growth of their carbon emissions to 2 percent a year through 2020, then cap emission growth after that. By 2050, the industry hopes to cut its greenhouse gas emissions to half their 2005 levels, according to the I.A.T.A.

"We are driven to be really fuel-efficient because fuel is usually our No. 1 cost," said Nancy Young, the vice president for regulatory affairs at Airlines for America, the industry's trade group. "So, we are driven to be very carbon-efficient as well. We are doing everything we can through technology and operations to reduce our emissions."

In 2014, domestic carriers burned 8 percent less fuel than they did in 2000, while carrying 20 percent more passengers and cargo, she said.

"The challenge is an important economic opportunity," Ms. Young said. "More and more people around the world want the benefit of air travel and all the good things that aviation brings. So there has been growth in aviation and this has increased emissions despite the fact that we are more efficient."

Buying new planes with more efficient engines remains the most effective path to reducing an airline's fuel costs. The newest generation of airplanes, like the Boeing 787 Dreamliner and the Airbus A350, promise about 20 percent better fuel economy thanks to new engines and lighter airframes.

So far, Boeing has delivered over 280 of its 787s to airlines around the world, out of more than 1,100 planes it has on order. Airbus has 780 A350s on order and has, so far, delivered just three.