



EPA takes first step to limit greenhouse-gas emissions from airlines

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WASHINGTON -- Airline emissions threaten human health by contributing to climate change, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed Wednesday.

The proposal for a so-called "endangerment finding" under the Clean Air Act is a precursor to the EPA proposing regulations to limit heat-trapping emissions from plane exhaust. The agency will collect public comment about the proposal for 60 days and will hold a hearing Aug. 11.

"The EPA administrator is proposing to find that (greenhouse gas) emissions from certain classes of engines used primarily in commercial aircraft contribute to the air pollution that causes climate change



A passenger plane climbs away from Geneva International Airport on March 11, 2010 (photo: FABRICE COFFRINI AFPI Getty Images)

and endangers public health and welfare," the agency said in a statement.

Christopher Grundler, director of EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality, said the proposal doesn't specify reductions in emissions because the U.S. is working with the International Civil Aviation Organization, a branch of the United Nations, to develop worldwide standards.

ICAO is expected to release its proposed emissions curbs by February 2016, and EPA would finalize its decision on whether the emissions endanger public health by spring 2016. Grundler acknowledged that U.S. emissions regulations would be proposed in the next presidential administration in 2017 and completed in 2018, if emissions are determined a danger.

"Today's notice does not pose requirements on any aircraft engines," Grundler said. "Our goal is to adopt a sound international standard."

Josh Earnest, a White House spokesman, said an international standard makes sense because it would be untenable for airlines to deal with a patchwork of regulations in different countries.

"I think it's a common-sense reason why we would rely on an international standard," he said.

Environmental advocates welcomed the endangerment proposal, but voiced disappointment that EPA proposed to wait for an international agreement to actually curb greenhouse-gas emissions from aviation.

Deborah Lapidus, director of the advocacy group Flying Clean Campaign, said aviation fuel efficiency declined since 2010 and that aviation remains the largest industry not regulated by EPA for its emissions.

"Airlines have responsibility to do their part on climate change, just like any other industry," Lapidus said.

But airlines have bridled at national or regional rules for curbing emissions, preferring worldwide standards for the competitive industry. Airlines worldwide agreed in 2013 to halt the growth in emissions from international flights by 2020.

"Aviation is a global industry, making it critical that aircraft emissions standards continue to be agreed upon at the international level," said Nancy Young, vice president for environmental affairs at A4A, a trade group for the largest U.S. airlines. "While we believe that any regulatory action must be consistent with both the agency's authority under the Clean Air Act and the future ICAO standard, today's action reconfirms the EPA's commitment to the ICAO process for achieving a global CO2 standard for new aircraft."

James Record, an aviation professor at Dowling College in New York and a former 30-year commercial pilot, said airlines seek worldwide standards because different rules for each country would be difficult to meet. Emissions regulations are likely to apply only to new aircraft, but Record said costs will be passed along to travelers for any regulations that are tougher to meet than current plane development.

"Any time a policy is implemented that will cost an airline money, that cost is always passed on to the consumer," Record said.

Environmentalists, however, said it would take years for emissions regulations to cover planes.

Bill Hemmings, aviation program manager for the advocacy group Transport & Environment, said ICAO regulatory talks ignore planes that are already flying, aircraft that will be launched before 2020

such as Boeing 787-10 and Airbus A330-800, and new-production aircraft such as the Boeing 737 MAX or Airbus A320neo.

“No one wants to regulate them and they will dominate aircraft deliveries for the next 10 years,” Hemmings said.

The EPA rule applies to commercial planes, but not general aviation and the military. The gases under the proposal are: carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulfur hexafluoride.

Airlines produce about 11% of the country’s greenhouse gases from transportation sources, or about 3% of total greenhouse-gas emissions, according to an analysis of EPA data by the International Council on Clean Transportation.

Environmentalists have praised President Obama for using the Clean Air Act to develop regulations reducing emissions from cars and power plants. But critics including Republicans in Congress have fought the rules.

Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, who heads the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, said regulating aviation emissions would raise ticket prices and hurt domestic airlines.

“The sky is the limit when it comes to how much of the U.S. economy the EPA wants to control,” Smith said. “Incentives are already in place to make air travel more energy efficient.”

Environmental groups – Earthjustice, Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Earth – filed a lawsuit in 2010 and the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled in 2012 that the Clean Air Act required the EPA to act.

The groups warned that after domestic emissions were cut in half from 1993 to 2010, emissions have stagnated since then and could quadruple from growth by 2050, according to an analysis by the International Council on Clean Transportation.

Vera Pardee, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute, said the EPA’s designation of a danger was necessary to begin regulations. But she voiced disappointment that EPA is deferring to an international group to develop regulations with the actual emissions limits.

“Airplane carbon pollution is skyrocketing, but the EPA is still dodging responsibility for curbing this climate threat,” Pardee said. “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.”

ICAO said a 2013 agreement to halt the growth in emissions by 2020 will allow airlines to support the economy and tourism. Talks continue on details of the policy. But the group’s goal is to adopt the specific policy by fall 2016, which airlines would then decide individually how to meet.

The International Air Transport Association, which represents 250 airlines worldwide; Airports Council International representing 1,860 airports; the Civil Air Navigation Services Organization; and the International Business Aviation Council agreed last year to the broad goal of halting emissions growth. The agreement calls for:

- Developing more efficient alternative fuels.
- Improving flight operations.
- Managing air traffic better.
- Designing a market-based measure for international flights.

But that last point has been contentious. For example, emissions limits adopted for flights the European Union caused a rift until U.S. flights to the continent were exempted.