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Environmental Groups Are Teaming Up To Make The EPA Regulate Airplane Emissions

by Emily Atkin
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Five national environmental groups have teamed up to push the Environmental Protection Agency toward crafting rules that would limit greenhouse gas emissions from airplanes, arguing that without regulation, airplanes will eventually become one of the largest contributors to climate change in the United States.

The Sierra Club, Earthjustice, Friends of the Earth, the National Resources Defense Council, and the Center for Biological Diversity on Thursday sent a letter to EPA and Federal Aviation Administration officials urging them to continue on the path toward developing strong carbon limits for aircraft under the federal Clean Air Act. Greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft are only responsible for about 2 to 3 percent of total U.S. emissions right now, but the letter argued that would change drastically without strict regulation.



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"[Aircraft] are one of the fastest-growing carbon pollution sources, on track to triple globally by 2050 under business-as-usual scenarios," the letter reads, citing a 2010 report from the U.K.'s Centre for Aviation Transport and the Environment. Indeed, the International Council on Clean Transportation reports that the airline industry is on track to contribute up to 15 percent of all human-caused carbon emissions worldwide by 2050 as demand for air travel rises, developing economies expand, and incomes increase.

The EPA is already moving toward regulating aircraft carbon emissions, albeit slower than environmental groups would like. Both the Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Earth have been pushing the EPA to regulate aircraft carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act since 2007, when the groups filed a lawsuit against the agency to speed up the rulemaking process. Eventually, the groups won, and

four years later in 2011, the judge on the case found that the EPA must begin crafting the regulations.

The first step for the EPA is issuing what's called an "endangerment finding," which essentially decides whether aircraft carbon emissions are harmful enough that they actually need to be regulated. The agency says it expects to have an proposed endangerment finding by April 2015, and a final one by 2016.

But the groups have their doubts, mostly because the EPA had once promised that the endangerment finding would be completed by early 2014, and that didn't happen. "They've dragged their feet this whole way," Vera Pardee, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, told ThinkProgress in November.

EPA spokesperson Enesta Jones told ThinkProgress at the time that it has been making progress on developing both its own regulations, and international carbon regulations for aircrafts through the International Civil Aviation Organization, which are expected to come out in 2016. She said the agency has been working with the Federal Aviation Administration, localities, manufactures, and the airline industry on the issues since 2009.

If the EPA's endangerment finding does say that aircraft emissions are harmful to public health or the environment, then the agency would be required under the Clean Air Act to adopt regulations. If that happens, the regulations stand to receive a lot of pushback from airlines, which have historically argued

that they don't need fuel efficiency regulations because it's cost-effective and good for business to reduce their carbon emissions. In addition, the International Civil Aviation Organization — the United Nations agency that regulates international aviation — has promised to come out with its own emissions regulations in 2016.

Either way, it seems the EPA can expect organized pressure from the national environmental groups, who have also pledged to sue if the EPA does not make sufficient progress this year in issuing the regulations.

"We know that EPA has given us their timetable, they say they're on it," Sarah Burt, an attorney at Earthjustice, said in November. "If that schedule starts to slip, we'll start looking more immediately at legal action."