

Aircraft Emissions May Be Next for U.S. Climate Rules

By Mark Drajem
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Aircraft may be next in line for U.S. regulation of greenhouse-gas emissions, as President Barack Obama's administration broadens its climate-change efforts beyond automobiles and power plants.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it would study the health dangers of that pollution -- the first step in the regulatory process -- and release its findings by next April. If it deems aircraft emissions a risk, it said it will begin the process of crafting rules. Advocates say that won't be a high hurdle.

"There is no choice but to craft and adopt emissions standards for aircraft," Vera Pardee, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, which filed a lawsuit pressing the EPA to take this action, said yesterday. "And once the U.S. acts, the world will have to follow."



Photographer: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

A Delta Air Lines Inc. airplane departs Ronald Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., U.S.

Representatives of airlines such as Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines Inc. (DAL) and aircraft maker Boeing Co. (BA), based in Chicago, said they support a global pact on limiting emissions. They have pledged to use more efficient aircraft designs, new biofuels and better practices to curb fuel use and reduce carbon output.

"The aviation industry has set very aggressive goals to reduce emissions," said Jessica Kowal, a spokeswoman for Boeing.

The EPA first found in 2009 that greenhouse gases endanger public health, part of the Obama administration's effort to establish fuel-economy standards for automobiles and trucks. It relied on that finding to propose regulations for carbon emissions for power plants. Given that previous determination, the finding for aircraft "is inevitable," Pardee said.

Unified Rules

Airlines have fought efforts in the European Union to cut

carbon emissions, and say they favor an international accord under the International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency, instead of piecemeal rules. They praised the EPA yesterday for presenting its regulation as part of those negotiations, which the agency said will conclude in early 2016.

In its filing yesterday, the EPA didn't say what form or stringency any new regulations would take.

"We are pleased that the EPA and FAA are actively engaged in the ICAO work to develop a carbon dioxide standard for new type aircraft for approval in 2016, and that the EPA is confirming the schedule to adopt the future international standard into U.S. law," Vaughn Jennings, a spokesman for Airlines for America, a Washington-based trade group, said in an e-mail. The group represents airlines including Delta.

The ICAO has determined that the international standards will apply to new aircraft and not the current fleet, he said.

Fuel Efficiency

Reducing aircraft emissions may prove difficult because planes can't use the alternative fuels available to automobiles, said Dave Swierenga, president of aviation consultant Aeroecon in Round Rock, Texas.

Potential regulations would probably be expensive for an industry that has invested heavily in redesigned engines and other technology to improve efficiency, he said.

"If you look at the history of fuel efficiency in the industry, it's hard to criticize the industry," Swierenga said. "They have constantly and continuously invested in more fuel-efficient airplanes and the less fuel they use, the fewer the emissions they have."