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As Aircraft Emissions Skyrocket, EPA Looks Into Regulation For First Time

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by Ari Phillipshttp
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Air travel is a carbon-intensive industry, and just like vehicles and power plants, its rising carbon pollution may soon be curtailed due to efforts from the Obama administration.

On Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency took a step towards adding aircraft emissions to the list of regulated pollution sources. In a statement the EPA said it will study the issue of greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft, the first step in the regulatory process, and release its findings by next April. If the agency finds airline emissions to be a risk to public health or the environment, it will begin the process of crafting rules. The rules would make airplanes subject to carbon emissions guidelines in a process similar to the one currently underway for vehicles and power plants.

"This rulemaking process shows that the administration is serious about acting on their commitment to limit global warming pollution with executive authority as they have shown time and time again," Rebecca Lefton, a senior policy analyst at the Center for American Progress, told ThinkProgress.

In August, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and Friends of the Earth threatened to sue the EPA for failing to address aircraft emissions. According to the CBD, aviation

accounts for about 11 percent of carbon dioxide pollution from the U.S. transportation sector and is one of the fastest-growing sources of carbon pollution, rising 3 to 5 percent each year. Globally, the airline industry could contribute as much as 15 percent of all man-made GHGs by 2050 as demand for air travel continues to rise. The International Civil Aviation Organization projects 4.9 percent annual growth in air passenger traffic and 5.2 percent annual growth in air freight traffic from 2010, more than doubling global air traffic by 2030.

"We are delighted that the EPA has finally taken the first step to reduce the airline industry's massive and ever-increasing greenhouse gas pollution, a dangerous threat to our climate," Vera Pardee, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute, said in a statement. "After nearly two decades of inaction, we don't know if the international community will issue meaningful carbon emission standards by 2016. But the good news is that the EPA must, and will, act — despite international foot-dragging."

The U.S. isn't the first to look into regulating airline emissions. In 2008, the European Union adopted a trading scheme for emissions from most flights in and out of the EU, a scheme many airlines strongly opposed. Since then, the EU has suspended its emissions trading program for airplanes going in and out of non-EU countries until 2016. According to Lefton, the process towards an international scheme for airline emissions took precedence over the regional scheme, and in order to keep negotiations moving the EU decided to put their program on hold so it wouldn't hinder progress. Now, the EU's scheme applies to flights that travel within the EU's 28 member states, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

The very nature of an industry that crosses borders on a regular basis makes implementing a regional initiative challenging, and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is expected to develop an international market-based GHG reduction program in 2016. The EPA's timeline coincides with ICAO's, signaling commitment to the international process.

The airlines industry reacted positively to the EPA's announcement, favoring a global accord rather than the current piecemeal approach.

"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, told Bloomberg BNA.

As airline passenger numbers continue to grow, reducing use of airplane transport — which may be a possibility with, for instance, vehicle transportation, if increased public transport opportunities are pursued — is not an easy option. According to Lefton, market-based measures are necessary.

"Emissions reductions cannot be met through operational and technical measures alone," she said.

There are a number of ways the U.S. could implement limits on airline emissions, Lefton said last year, including "efficiency standards for new engines, a domestic market-based

measure, or many other approaches. Such policies could drive real emissions reductions while giving the airlines the flexibility to comply in the best way for their businesses." They also wouldn't result in significantly higher ticket prices, Lefton said.

Of course, while the country waits to determine whether or not the EPA will regulate airline emissions, it's possible to make a personal decision not to fly anymore. Weatherman Eric Holthaus decided last year that, for the good of the environment, he was giving up flying altogether. Holthaus told ClimateProgress he decided to stop flying once he realized it was the biggest contributor to his carbon footprint.

"I do everything, I recycle, I don't own a car, I'm a vegetarian, all of the things that are reducing my carbon footprint. But I also fly 75,000 miles a year," he said. "So when I plugged that in a carbon calculator, it's like, wow, I have double the emission of the average American and here I am every day telling people to take action and I'm not doing it myself."