



Bart Jansen,
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WASHINGTON – Two environmental groups sued the Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday to force faster action in setting limits on airline emissions that contribute to climate change.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Earth filed the case in U.S. District Court because EPA hasn't finalized its conclusion that airline emissions endanger people in a long-standing case.

A federal court ruled in July 2011 that EPA has a duty under the Clean Air Act to determine whether airline emissions hurt people by boosting greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide that raise average temperatures. But EPA isn't expected to complete the endangerment finding until later this spring, with regulations potentially adopted in 2018 – seven years after the court ruling.

"That's outrageous because we shouldn't have to sue," said Vera Pardee, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute.

EPA faces lawsuit over airline emissions



The groups didn't request specific goals for emissions reductions in their 19-page suit. If they are successful, the groups asked the court to order EPA to issue its endangerment finding within 30 days and propose emissions standards for airlines to meet.

"This is not rocket science at all," Pardee said.

The EPA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

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.

Airlines argue they are voluntarily reducing emissions by flying more efficient planes and routes because it is in their interest to reduce fuel costs. U.S. airlines also urged worldwide standards, so they aren't left at a disadvantage in competing against carriers in other countries.

The International Civil Aviation Organization, a branch of the United Nations, proposed standards for airline emissions in February. The proposal requires new aircraft designs meet better emissions standards starting in 2020 and designs already in production to comply by 2023.

Once fully implemented, the standards are supposed to reduce carbon emissions by 650 million tons from 2020 to 2040. That's the equivalent of getting 140 million cars off the road for a year, according to the White House.

“(The) agreement is an important signal that the international community is well-positioned to rise to the challenge of implementing a global market-based approach to reduce aviation emissions,” the White House said in February.

Environmental groups contend the standards are less strict than what the latest planes are already achieving, and would apply only to new planes rather than existing, less-efficient fleets that could fly for decades.