November 18, 2015

Todd Stern  
Special Envoy for Climate Change  
U.S. Department of State  
Harry S. Truman Building  
2201 C Street, NW, Room 3880  
Washington, D.C. 20522-2008


Dear Mr. Stern,

As the world prepares to meet in Paris to fight the climate crisis, I would like to draw your attention to a major new report showing enormous potential to reduce planet-warming pollution from airplanes, one of the fastest-growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

A new International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) report finds that some of the top 20 transatlantic air carriers can drive down emissions by as much as 51 percent using existing technology and operational improvements. In other words, airlines with the worst fuel efficiency can improve their carbon footprint by more than half today simply by matching the efficiency of their competitors.

The ICCT’s landmark report offers yet another key reason for your negotiating team to support strong measures to reduce airplane pollution at the upcoming United Nations climate summit. It examined the top 20 airlines’ fuel efficiency for non-stop transatlantic flights linking Europe, the U.S. and Canada. Norwegian Air Shuttle ranked first in fuel efficiency, while British Airways ranked last. Factors leading to Norwegian’s much better performance included newer airplanes, the use of efficient Boeing 787-8 aircraft, and a smaller proportion of business and first class seats. Conversely, an aging, technologically outdated fleet, heavy reliance on Boeing 747-400 airplanes and a high proportion of premium class seating led to the poor fuel efficiency results for British Airways.

The stunning 51 percent gap between Norwegian and British Airways should be a wake-up call for the Paris negotiations. If aviation were considered a country, it would rank seventh after Germany in terms of carbon emissions – and the industry’s emissions are set to more than triple by 2050. Aviation’s skyrocketing carbon pollution

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mandate that the sector do its part to reduce greenhouse emissions and hold global temperature increases below 1.5/2 degrees.

The aviation industry has fought measures to curb its carbon pollution for nearly two decades. It now supports aviation standards under discussion by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) that would cover just 5% of the existing fleet by 2030 and barely bend the curve of its steeply rising greenhouse gas pollution. While fighting meaningful standards, the industry touts carbon offsets as the way to achieve its professed goal of carbon-neutral growth by 2020. Offsets, however, are notoriously difficult to trace, verify and monitor, and many do nothing for the climate at all because their purported carbon savings are illusory. Cost-effective, technology-driven greenhouse gas standards for new and existing planes, on the other hand, verifiably prevent and avoid greenhouse gases in the first place, rather than merely “offsetting” them. And the new ICCT report proves unequivocally that tremendous efficiency gains are not just achievable sometime in the future, but have already created a spectacular pollution gap among carriers of more than 50 percent.

The ICCT report demonstrates that the industry’s eye-catching failure to pick even low-hanging fruit — that is, currently practiced, cost-effective, competitive technology and operational improvements — is emblematic of its intransigent neglect of the climate damage it causes. Absent mandatory standards, this behavior will persist, and airlines will continue to under-invest in currently available efficiency measures despite the fact that they often pay for themselves. A prior ICCT study of air carrier fuel efficiency, for example, notes that improved fuel efficiency could have brought about savings of $2.26 billion or more for the airlines in 2010 alone. There is no indication this pattern will change without strong intervention by the United States and the Conference of the Parties.

It would be extremely difficult if not impossible to prevent catastrophic warming without strong international action to curb the exponential growth of airline carbon pollution. To protect our planet, I urge you to support efforts to finalize a Paris accord that folds aviation into the overall goal of keeping temperature increases below 1.5/2 degrees and stops the industry’s high-flying threat to our climate.

Sincerely,

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