



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on June 11, 2015

EPA Announces Airplane Emissions “Endangerment Finding”

The Environmental Protection Agency has declared that the emissions from airplanes endanger human health and contribute to climate change, setting the stage for airplane emissions to be regulated.

On Wednesday, the EPA announced the “endangerment finding,” which comes as the EPA is also forging ahead with a controversial regulation for wetlands and waterways, preparing to tighten fuel efficiency standards for heavy trucks, and nearing a launch for a landmark greenhouse-gas rule for power plants.



In its 194-page finding, the EPA said it took “a preliminary but necessary first step to begin to address greenhouse gas emissions from the aviation sector, the highest-emitting category of transportation sources that the EPA has not yet addressed.”

The *New York Times* writes that the EPA will await current international negotiations on limiting carbon emissions in the aviation industry, part of a lengthy push by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a branch of the United Nations.

Those discussions began in 2009, with a final agreement on those standards expected in February 2016. However, they are not expected to go into effect until 2020, possibly even 2025, Fox News writes. A final decision on whether the United States would adopt the international standards would likely fall on the next president.

“Our No. 1 goal is to secure a meaningful international standard,” said Christopher Grundler, director of the EPA’s Office of Transportation and Air Control. “There are sound environmental reasons to do so. An international policy would secure far more greenhouse gas emissions reductions than a domestic-only plan.”

Environmental groups have voiced concerns about relying on the ICAO, however, claiming that the organization’s standards will be too weak since it engages in close consultation with airlines.

“Airplane carbon pollution is skyrocketing, but the E.P.A. is still dodging responsibility for curbing this climate threat,” said Vera Pardee, senior counsel and supervising lawyer at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Passing the buck to an international organization that’s virtually run by the airline industry won’t protect our planet from these rapidly growing emissions.”

International Council on Clean Transportation Program Director Dan Rutherford asserts that ICAO should apply a carbon dioxide standard to all new aircraft delivered after 2020 in order to ensure real emissions reductions.

“But ICAO is considering a standard that would apply only to new designs certified after the expected application date of Jan. 1, 2020,” Reuters reports.



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Deborah Lapidus, director of the Flying Clean campaign, argues that the EPA has the authority to regulate domestic airline emissions immediately, and that the agency should set the standard ahead of the international standards to provide a roadmap.

“The airlines have a responsibility to do their part on climate change just like every other industry, and E.P.A. needs to hold them to that,” Lapidus said.

The EPA has the legal backing to do so. Politico writes,

The Supreme Court has made it clear that EPA can regulate greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide so long as it determines those emissions threaten public health, and it upheld EPA’s 2009 finding that cars pose such a threat. EPA later extended that finding to emissions from power plants, the greatest source of U.S. carbon pollution.

Airlines emissions comprise about two percent of the annual global greenhouse gas emissions, though airplane manufacturers have made significant efforts to increase fuel efficiency since the jet age of the 1960s.

Boeing states that fuel efficiency has increased 70 percent. Boeing spokesman Tim Neale [told the Associated Press](#), “We’re hard at work on lighter airplanes, and GE is hard at work on more efficient engines.... And we’re working on a lot of these operational issues with the carriers so they operate the planes more efficiently.”

Calculations by the International Air Transport Association show that every 5.5 pounds of weight reduction on an airplane brings one ton of carbon emissions reduction each year. Airlines have worked to reduce aircraft weight by using lighter material for seats and even cutting back on the ice they bring on board. Airlines have also helped improve fuel efficiency by increasing the number of passengers on each flight, but those emissions reductions have generally been offset by an increase in overall air travel.

Studies show Alaska, Frontier, and Spirit airlines are the most fuel-efficient U.S. airlines, while American Airlines proved to be the least fuel-efficient.

Critics contend that the EPA proposal will raise the cost of airline tickets and cause flights to become even more overcrowded. Some argue the EPA proposal is less about climate change and more about control.

For instance, Representative Lamar Smith (R-Texas), chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, said the regulations would “increase the price of airfare for Americans and harm our domestic carriers.” He contends that the announcement is just part of the EPA’s effort to “control how Americans live, work and travel.”

Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman James Inhofe (R-Okla.) opined that the proposal is “further proof of extreme environmental groups charting this country’s regulatory course.” He noted that, “conveniently,” the president’s travels on Air Force One would not be subject to the rules.



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