Aviation’s climate action takes flight

3 April 2015
Tags: aviation, climate change, fuel efficiency, technology, infrastructure
Michael Gill, Executive Director, Air Transport Action Group

I would like you to think for a moment about the coordination it takes to get one flight into the air. From the engineers who build and maintain the aircraft, to the airline flight crews and the airport baggage handlers and ground teams, the catering staff and the air traffic management personnel coordinating progress through the air. Not to mention the passengers, fuel providers and government agencies. Each day, 100,000 flights take off – that’s an awful lot of coordination!

We have taken that collaborative approach and used it to tackle another challenge – one that the whole world must face – and that is climate change. Six years ago, industry leaders agreed on a path forward, centred around three global goals underpinned by a four-pillar strategy for achieving them:

- New technology, including sustainable alternative fuels.
- Improved operational efficiency.
- Infrastructure measures.
- A global market-based measure.

Goal one: an average annual 1.5% annual improvement in the fuel efficiency of the world fleet. This is being pursued through activities being undertaken in the first three pillars and we are currently achieving the goal with a fleet-wide fuel efficiency improvement of 2.9% per annum. Nearly a trillion dollars has been spent by airlines on over 8,000 new, more efficient, aircraft.
Operational and infrastructure measures are also playing their part.

**Goal two: stabilising net aviation CO2 emissions at 2020 levels through carbon-neutral growth.** This is being pursued by the industry pushing a global market-based measure (MBM) for aviation emissions through the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Like the global negotiations on climate change taking place in Paris at the end of this year, the discussions around a global MBM for aviation need to reconcile the desire of parts of the world to develop their aviation sector as a means of economic and social growth with the important climate change objective. However, the process at ICAO has shown encouraging momentum and the industry is confident that a comprehensive agreement will play an important role in the sustainable development of the sector. It is vital that this agreement is global in nature and preserves fair competition between airlines.

**Goal three: halving aviation’s net CO2 emissions by 2050 (when compared with a 2005 baseline),** is the most ambitious goal but we are already pushing for action in two key areas: the development of radical new technologies (the makers of aircraft and engines already spend around $15 billion per year on efficiency research and development); and the establishment of a sustainable alternative fuel industry for aviation (this year will see the first regular use of alternative fuel for commercial passenger flights – we expect this new energy source to grow over time).

We are excited about meeting this climate challenge. Importantly, it is encouraging to see the significant collaborative action taking place, with partners across the industry working together. It’s an ambitious plan - but then we move nine million people around the planet on 49,000 routes every day, so we are definitely ready for it!

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