

## **A Greener Shade of White Paper?**

**Peter Lockley**

**The Sustainable Aviation Strategy**, partly paid for and prominently endorsed by a grinning Tony Blair, speaks of a new awareness within the industry of environmental issues. Like corporates across the spectrum, aviation players realise that doing nothing is no longer an option.

Emissions from aviation are growing faster than those from any other sector. Its virtually tax-free status is under ever-closer scrutiny in the media, so it is a timely moment to advance the in-house vision of a sustainable future.

Environmentalists can, cautiously, welcome this voluntary initiative, but it is certainly over-reliant on technology. The headline commitments are a 50% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2020, and 80% in nitrogen oxide – *in the best new aircraft*.

Aircraft stay in service for around 40 years, so even these (non-binding) targets, with better traffic management, could only improve fuel efficiency by 1-2% a year. Meanwhile traffic is predicted to grow by at least 4%, leaving a 2-3% net *increase* in emissions every year. The facts are incontrovertible, the Strategy quietly admits them. To curb the growth in emissions, we need to restrain demand, to moderate growth – something corporations find it very hard to endorse. The industry prefers, in fact, to stake its claim to a slice of the emissions pie. Nowhere do we find the phrase ‘demand management’; we are told instead that *‘there is a powerful case for aviation to take up some of the earth’s capacity to absorb greenhouse gases’*.

Recent research by the Tyndall Centre, however, demonstrated that in a scenario where carbon dioxide is to be stabilised at 450 parts per million (and leading scientists are now talking about 430 ppm as a ‘safe’ limit), on current trends aviation will be eating up the *entire* pie of UK permitted emissions by 2035.

### **How can demand be managed?**

The main option being considered at EU level is to include aviation within the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, and the Strategy does well to endorse this.

Trading has the potential to be a robust instrument, but it is crucial that it is designed to drive genuine emissions reductions and not provide a least-cost get out for the industry.

This will mean auctioning permits, according to the ‘polluter pays’ principle, rather than allocating them free of charge, and extending the scheme beyond just intra-EU flights. The softer options would lead to a paltry price increase of a few euro cents per ticket, hardly enough to manage demand.

The Strategy is seen as the first step in an interactive process. The second step will be to engage with policymakers and environmental groups to design a robust trading scheme. It would be a giant leap backwards to wage a media campaign calling for the most diluted form of trading.

Carbon dioxide is not the only way aircraft cause climate change – nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>) and persistent contrails may do twice as much damage again, so a scheme

trading CO2 alone will never be enough.

The Strategy acknowledges this, but citing scientific uncertainty commits only to *proposing* ‘appropriate mechanisms’ by 2012. This is not good enough.

Time is short, and it is perfectly feasible to take a minimum estimate of the damage and apply en-route NOx charges immediately – they can always be revised upwards as the science solidifies...

Elsewhere, the Strategy makes welcome commitments on noise and pledges to improve surface access, although few go beyond the requirements of the Government’s aviation White Paper. Indeed the two documents are predicated throughout on the same principle, i.e. *growth is good and the environmental damage it causes should be mitigated... when the price is right!*

***Peter Lockley works on policy development for the Aviation Environment Federation, the leading UK organisation addressing the environmental impacts of aviation: [www.aef.org.uk](http://www.aef.org.uk) or call 020 7248 2223.***

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