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States, Cities and Environmental Groups Urge EPA to Reduce Global Warming Pollution from Aircraft

Washington, DC – A coalition of environmental groups, states and regional governments filed petitions with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today urging the agency to address the effects of vast amounts of global warming pollution from the world’s aircraft fleet. The petitions are the first step in a process that requires the EPA to evaluate the current impacts of aircraft emissions, seek public comment and develop rules to reduce aircraft emissions or explain why it will not act. Earthjustice filed the environmental groups’ petition on behalf of Friends of the Earth, Oceana and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Also filing petitions today are the Attorneys General of California, Connecticut, New Jersey and New Mexico, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (Southern California), the City of New York, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and the District of Columbia.

Aviation’s Contribution to Global Warming

Aircraft emit huge amounts of carbon dioxide. In fact, they currently account for 12 percent of carbon dioxide emissions from U.S. transportation sources and three percent of the United States’ total carbon dioxide emissions. The United States is responsible for nearly *half* of worldwide carbon dioxide emissions from aircraft.

Aircraft also emit nitrogen oxides, known as NO_x, which contribute to the formation of ozone, another greenhouse gas. Emissions of NO_x at high altitudes result in greater concentrations of ozone than ground-level emissions. Aircraft also emit water vapor at high altitude that forms condensation trails or “contrails.” Contrails are visible cloud lines that form in cold, humid atmospheres and contribute to the warming impacts of aircraft emissions. Moreover, the persistent formation of contrails is associated with increased cirrus cloud cover, which also warms the Earth’s surface.

Together, these high altitude emissions have a greater global warming impact than if the emissions were released at ground-level. A recent report by the UK Royal Commission on Environmental Protection found that the net effects of ozone, contrail and aviation-induced cloud cover is likely to triple the warming effect of aircraft-emitted CO₂ alone. The report concludes that if these estimates are correct and the anticipated growth in aviation realized, aviation may be responsible for between six and ten percent of the human impact on climate by the year 2050.

Aircraft Emissions Expected to Triple by Mid-Century

Greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft are anticipated to increase substantially in the coming decades due to the projected growth in air transport both domestically and globally. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, greenhouse gas emissions from U.S. domestic aircraft are expected to increase 60 percent by 2025. Globally, aircraft emissions are expected to more than triple by mid-century. While some countries have already begun to respond to these challenges, the United States has failed to address this enormous source of emissions.

The Petition

In the petition to Stephen L. Johnson, Administrator of the U.S. EPA, the environmental groups said:

“[I]t is indisputable that greenhouse gas emissions, including those from aircraft engines, are air pollutants that are causing and contributing to global climate change, with severe environmental consequences for the planet and all of its inhabitants. EPA has broad discretion in promulgating regulations to limit greenhouse gases from aviation. Moreover, numerous measures are currently available that can reduce the global warming impacts of aircraft emissions, and new technologies and other procedures under development can be brought online to further reduce emissions within reasonable timeframes. Consequently, Petitioners request that EPA undertake its mandatory duty to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from aircraft engines.”

The petition filed today asks the EPA to respond within 180 days and initiate a formal process to limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from all U.S. certified aircraft and all foreign aircraft arriving in or departing from U.S. airports, which it could do by:

- Adopting operational measures to minimize fuel use and reduce emissions from aircraft;
- Requiring the use of lighter, more aerodynamic, and more energy efficient airplanes, as well as the development of even more efficient designs; and
- Adopting regulatory measures to create incentives for the use of cleaner jet fuels.

“With the April 2007 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, EPA now has a mandate to regulate greenhouse gas emissions,” said Alice Thomas, an attorney from Earthjustice who filed the petition on behalf of the environmental groups. “Today, we are asking the EPA to begin the process of reducing the global warming impact from one of the world’s fastest growing sectors.”

“Global warming pollution is taking a massive toll on marine life,” said Dr. Michael Hirshfield, Oceana’s chief scientist and senior vice president for North America. “To preserve these critical ecosystems, the U.S. must take the lead in regulating aircraft emissions, since aircraft are a major source of carbon dioxide,” added Hirshfield.

“Halting and reversing global warming will require innovation across every sector of the global economy, including aviation,” said Danielle Fugere of Friends of the Earth. “Regulating greenhouse gas pollution within, to and from the U.S. will speed international efforts to slow global warming.”

“Global warming is the single greatest threat to the diversity of life on Earth,” said Andrea Treece, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. “We still have a window of opportunity to save species like the polar bear but that window is rapidly closing. Limiting greenhouse gas pollution from aviation is an important part of the overall solution and the EPA should do so immediately.”

Earthjustice is a non-profit public interest law firm dedicated to protecting the magnificent places, natural resources, and wildlife of this earth and to defending the right of all people to a healthy environment. We bring about far-reaching change by enforcing and strengthening environmental laws on behalf of hundreds of organizations and communities. For more information, go to www.earthjustice.org.

Oceana is an international ocean conservation group, which works to protect and restore ocean ecosystems from many threats, including climate change. For more information, go to www.oceana.org/climate.

Friends of the Earth is the U.S. voice of the world’s largest environmental federation, with grassroots groups in more than 70 countries. FoE fights to defend the environment and ensure a healthy and just world. Its Clean Vessels Campaign works to reduce pollution from ships and other oceangoing vessels. For more information, go to www.foe.org.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national nonprofit conservation organization with more than 35,000 members dedicated to protecting endangered species and wild lands. For more information, go to www.biologicaldiversity.org.

You may read the petition filed today by environmental groups here:

http://www.oceana.org/fileadmin/oceana/uploads/Climate_Change/Aircraft_GHG_Petition_embargoed_2_.pdf

Background

EPA Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990 – 2005, (2007)

<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/downloads06/07CR.pdf>

Key Aviation and Global Warming Resources (cited in petition)

<http://www.earthjustice.org/library/background/key-aviation-and-global-warming-resources.html>