

Only 25 years ago — when the first Virgin Atlantic flight took off, bound for New York — few on board would have recognised the phrases “climate change”, “greenhouse gases” or “carbon footprints”. Since then, they have become part of daily conversation, and we are all much more aware of the challenges society faces in squaring reliance on carbon intensive activities with the urgent need to halt — and then reverse — the rise in global greenhouse gas emissions.

I’m not going to get into a debate on the relative contribution of aviation to greenhouse gas emissions. That is not important. What is important — particularly when the scientists are telling us that we need to massively reduce global carbon dioxide emissions — is that air travel, notwithstanding the current economic downturn, is growing rapidly. And that the considerable efficiency gains being achieved in the design of new engines and aircraft are not enough to offset the growth in CO₂ emissions associated with this booming industry.

Flying is crucial to the global economy and central to many people’s lifestyles — it links individuals, families and communities, and results in vibrant and successful businesses and cultures. But we need to be part of a discussion about how the industry — and the regulatory frameworks in which we operate — can adapt to meet the needs of a carbon constrained world.

Governments will have much to discuss when they come together in Copenhagen in December. But concerns about the global economic downturn must not be allowed to weaken their resolve to sign up to ambitious targets on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The meeting is also a key opportunity for them to set a clear direction on how to include aviation within such a framework.



STEVE RIDGWAY
Chief Executive of
Virgin Atlantic Airways

We’re a global industry and — as such — need global solutions. Inclusion in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, which comes into effect from 2012, is a first step in establishing a robust target, and incentivising lower carbon behaviour. Unfortunately, though, it will have little impact on global CO₂ emissions levels as its scope is limited to flights arriving at, and departing from, EU airports.

The Aviation Global Deal Group, of which Virgin Atlantic is a member — along with Air France-KLM, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Finnair, Qatar Airways and Virgin Blue, airport operator BAA and the environmental organisation The Climate Group — was founded last year to stimulate ideas on how CO₂ emissions from

international aviation could be included in a global climate change framework.

Earlier this year we published a set of principles which we believe should form the basis of a successful mechanism for dealing with carbon dioxide from international aviation. First and foremost, any system needs to be environmentally effective. It must impose a robust

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cap on overall emissions and truly allow aviation to play its part in meeting global greenhouse gas reduction targets. It must be mandatory, applying to all airlines equally, and establish a sectoral approach which sets specific targets for aviation whilst allowing them access to cost effective emissions reductions from other sectors. It needs to minimise the risk of competitive distortions and negative unintended consequences such as carbon leakage, whilst recognising the central pillar of the UNFCCC, of “common but differentiated responsibility”.

The Group’s policy mechanism, proposed as one of the ways in which aviation can be brought into a global framework, recommends that this common but differentiated responsibility — where developed countries bear a greater burden for enabling emissions reductions as they have benefited from carbon intensive industrialisation for much longer than developing ones — is achieved through how the revenues generated by a sectoral cap and trade scheme are disbursed. We believe a proportion of aviation’s carbon allowances should be auctioned, with the proceeds going to climate change related projects in the developing world.

Virgin Atlantic is not afraid to try new things. In the days before our demonstration flight in February last year, we were being told that planes would never fly on biofuel, that fuels derived from biomass couldn’t meet the stringent performance targets required of a jet fuel. We love proving people wrong and our “proof of concept” flight — the culmination of many months of rigorous testing in labs and on engine rigs — did just that. Since then, massive progress has been made in the technical certification of bio-derived fuels and they are now recognised as a key ingredient in setting aviation on a lower carbon flight path.

Aviation is in a unique position, as this brand new supply chain emerges, to make sure that full consideration is given to the sustainability of these new fuels. We would anticipate that considerable savings will be made in the comparative life-cycle carbon footprints of second generation fuels, but internationally agreed methodologies must be agreed on how to account for these. And we must make sure that cultivating the biomass feedstock does not compete with food crops for land or water, or cause deforestation and the loss of high-value eco-systems. Their production should also provide socio-economic benefit to the communities in which they are grown and give access to lower carbon energy for more than just aviation.

We recognise, however, that biofuels are no silver bullet. They must be accompanied by a continued focus on fuel efficiency, on reducing the carbon intensity of each passenger and cargo kilometre flown. Virgin Atlantic has set its own challenging carbon intensity target and we’re confident that, despite continuing to grow our fleet and the number of passengers we carry each year, our absolute carbon footprint will peak within the next decade.

As a great believer in human innovation, I am confident that — through a combination of renewable fuels and step changes in technology — Virgin Atlantic and our colleagues in the wider industry will be able to meet the challenge and secure aviation’s future in a carbon constrained world. But a robust yet ambitious global policy framework is critical, and will be delivered only when Governments join forces in Copenhagen this December and agree a clear path forward for our sector.

For more information on the Aviation Global Deal Group, please visit: www.agdgroup.org

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