

Canada helps broker negotiations for UN pact on airline emissions

Transport Minister Marc Garneau says historic deal would be 'significant' achievement

By Kathleen Harris, Margo McDiarmid, [CBC News](#) | Posted: Sep 09, 2016 5:00 PM ET | Last Updated: Sep 09, 2016 5:00 PM ET

Canada is playing a leadership role in international negotiations for a landmark UN accord that would set a global market price on airline pollution.

Officials from 191 member states of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) have been wrestling behind the scenes in the run-up to the UN body's assembly that opens at its Montreal headquarters on Sept. 27.

- ▣ [U.S. moves to regulate airline emissions](#)
- ▣ [UN body brokers aviation emissions plan](#)

It could be a historic first for the aviation sector — and a critical test for Canada's diplomatic muscle.

The key goal is to create a common carbon-credit system and establish aircraft certifications leading to a carbon-neutral growth in emissions by 2020.

Transport Minister Marc Garneau said bringing all countries on side is a formidable challenge, and signing a deal would mark a "significant" achievement.

Global standards needed

"If Canada takes an approach with respect to its airlines and other countries don't, then it's not really achieving what we need to achieve, because there is competition between these airlines," he told CBC News. "So we need everyone to be on board and that's what's unique about this."

The stakes are high, but reaching consensus, for now, is far from certain.

Concessions to bring in developing countries such as a voluntary period and phased-in targets have been staunchly opposed by some members like the European Union.



The 191 member states of the International Civil Aviation Organization meet in Montreal Sept. 27 to negotiate a deal on global emissions standards. (Remy de la Mauviniere/Associated Press)

Right now, airlines make up roughly two per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental groups say an uptake of 80 to 90 per cent of the world's emitters is required to slow global warming.

Technical talks have been in the works for more than a decade, and if an agreement is reached in Montreal, it would be the first sector deal since the Paris climate talks.

Important precedent

"It's a big deal in terms of the amount of emissions and the precedent it would set," said Annie Petsonk, international counsel for the Washington based Environmental Defence Fund.

The overall cost to industry is pegged at 0.5 to 1.5 per cent, which she estimates would add an average \$6 to \$7 US to the price of a ticket.

With the deal now down to the wire, Petsonk said three main sticking points remain:

- Which countries will be covered and which will carve out exceptions.
- Which participating countries with developing aviation industries should get a break.
- How the carbon offset market will work to include other sectors beyond aviation.

Petsonk said there's a lot riding on a deal, since International Civil Aviation Organization assembly won't reconvene for another three years.

"If there's a failure by ICAO in some sense that failure falls, in diplomatic terms, on Canada as well as on ICAO," she said.

U.S., China on board

The world's biggest emitters like the U.S. and China have agreed to sign on, but developing countries argue it will hurt their burgeoning industries.

Michael Gill, executive director of the Air Transport Action Group, a coalition of industry organizations and companies, said a global pact is "fundamental" to the sector's climate strategy.

While a mandatory regime with common standards is preferred, he said a watered-down deal is better than none at all.

"So what we are focusing on now is encouraging as many states as possible to state their intent to volunteer to participate in the program and to do so as soon as possible," he said in an interview from Geneva.

The airline industry is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the transportation sector, and the volume of air travel is expected to grow fast in the years to come.



WestJet says it has spent \$3.8 billion in fleet renewal to improve fuel efficiency and curb greenhouse gas emissions. (Danyt Dyck/Canadian Press)

Some of the elements of the agreement are expected to include:

- Certification standards to convert new aircraft to more aerodynamic and fuel efficient designs.
- Changing flight patterns (planes burn the most fuel during takeoff and landing; cruising at high altitudes is the most fuel-efficient period).
- Conversion to bio-fuels.

The Air Transport Association of Canada warned that air carriers have already been making big strides to burn less fuel and curb emissions — at a big cost to the industry. Any new measures brought in too fast could disadvantage domestic carriers in a globally competitive market.

The association president John McKenna said there should be a lengthy implementation period and comprehensive study on the financial impact.

But some companies are taking a wait-and-see approach before raising an alarm.

Fuel efficiency key

WestJet vice-president Richard Bertram said his company has spent \$3.8 billion in fleet renewal and other improvements to burn less fuel.

They include everything from flying lighter planes and adding winglets that reduce drag, to removing metal trays, carrying less water and using lighter paper for the in-flight magazine.

"All these things may seem like little things, but they're certainly big things to us when you look at a fleet of almost 150 aircraft now and all the places we're going to be flying around the world," he said.

Air Canada said fuel efficiency is good for the environment but also good for the financial bottom line.

"Air Canada believes a global market-based mechanism is an effective approach because, if well-designed, it can avoid the cost and administrative complexity of a patchwork of regional measures and put all carriers on an equal competitive footing," said company spokesman Peter Fitzpatrick.