



International Civil Aviation Organization

WORKING PAPER

A42-WP/340

EX/143

1/8/25

(Information paper)

English only

ASSEMBLY — 42ND SESSION

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Agenda Item 15: Environmental Protection – General provisions, Aircraft Noise and Local Air Quality

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING A SECTORAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE PLASTIC MANAGEMENT

(Presented by the International Air Transport Association (IATA))

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This information paper calls attention to the multiple challenges related to plastics in aviation and the opportunity to develop a sectoral approach for sustainable plastic management that provides specific guidance for priority plastic products. It notes the latest text of the United Nations (UN) Plastics Treaty and aims to minimize plastic pollution and contribute to the circular economy. This information paper also highlights the need for the introduction of harmonized, more effective regulations.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This working paper relates to the Strategic Goal – <i>Aviation is Environmentally Sustainable</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	Not applicable
<i>References:</i>	UNEP. Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In March 2022, at the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), a Resolution was adopted to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution. The resolution aims to improve healthy living circumstances for humans and nature, including biodiversity, and mentions the development of specific guidance through a sectoral approach.

1.2 Plastics benefit the aviation sector due to their strength, lightness, and hygienic properties. They contribute to safety, security, and hygiene requirements and provide many advantages from an operational perspective. However, multiple challenges exist related to improving plastics' performance, ranging from recycling, reuse, and replacement to end-of-life management.

1.3 The inappropriate disposal of single-use plastic products (SUPP) and their impact on the marine environment is a key challenge for our society. Beyond SUPP, the sector also faces challenges with end-of-life management of plastic elements from cabin retrofits and composite plastics from newer aircraft types.

1.4 Although SUPP are widely used in aviation, voluntary action by airlines and airports has demonstrated that the sector is keen to replace these products with more sustainable alternatives. Furthermore, the overall design of aircraft components and cabin interiors is considering options for the reuse and recycling of the different elements.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1 Inappropriate and asymmetric regulations restrict the sector's ability to contribute to the circular economy and replace SUPP with sustainable alternatives. Many regulators have implemented local, regional, or national restrictions without considering the global characteristics of the aviation sector and without recognizing that alternatives to SUPP must meet strict aviation security and hygiene constraints, resulting in a complex and fragmented compliance environment for airlines and airports, curtailing the potential benefits of any such regulation.

2.2 Alternatives to plastics may require different processes in either the re-use phase or additional steps for disposal, which may impact logistics or the supply chain. It is important to introduce practices that inform and support decision-making processes and engage with suppliers that consider operational requirements when they are creating alternative products.

2.3 There is a proliferation of standards and certifications that differ in definitions, methodology, and labeling systems. It is crucial to develop tools that are appropriate for the industry and globally recognized. Simple, harmonized, common definitions and standards for plastic products and their alternatives are needed.

2.4 When developing a strategic approach to tackling plastic pollution, it is vital to consider the challenges and impacts to prevent unintended consequences. Any guidance should examine the entire life cycle of plastics to assess different environmental impacts and avoid displacing pollution into the atmosphere due to heavier alternatives.

2.5 The International Air Transport Association (IATA)'s activities related to sustainable plastics management include the following:

2.5.1 Guidance on the harmonization of SUPP regulations for environmental authorities for the development of and adoption of a national SUPP replacement strategy for aviation.

2.5.2 Publication of the “Reassessing Single Use Plastic Products (SUPP) in the Airline Sector” report to assist airlines, regulators, and the airline supply chain to mitigate the environmental impacts of SUPP and develop, adapt, and implement the solutions best suited to an aircraft's unique environment.

2.5.3 Following the recommendations found in the SUPP report, IATA is preparing a “Harmonized life cycle assessment methodology for single-use plastic products and their alternatives in the airline sector” to bring consistency to the industry’s efforts to assess environmental impacts.

2.5.4 Newly developed Cabin Waste Audits to refine the “Airline Waste Analysis Methodology” and to have up-to-date information around cabin waste composition and the amount of plastic used in cabin services.

2.5.5 IATA has continuously engaged with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in an effort to ensure that aviation’s specificities will be reflected in the Plastics Treaty. In multiple interventions, IATA has highlighted the need for harmonized and simplified SUPP regulations and a sectoral approach that considers a holistic view of the challenge of plastics management in aviation.

2.5.6 IATA is co-leading the ICAO’s Committee on Aviation Environmental Protection (CAEP) Working Group 2 Task O.09 together with The Netherlands, to develop guidance material for managing plastic use in the international aviation sector for use by all aviation industry stakeholders to ensure that a harmonized approach is adopted based on circular economy principles.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The development of a sectoral approach to sustainable plastics management that considers the particularities of the aviation sector can provide demand signals to the emerging sustainable alternatives market, and encourage the development of appropriate recycling, reuse and recovery systems and infrastructure that will result in reduced plastic waste, enhanced material recovery, and financial benefits.

3.2 Coordinated action between governments and the airline sector is needed to promote regulatory change to ensure aviation makes a positive contribution to the circular economy.

3.3 The Assembly is invited to take note of this Information Paper.

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