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Agenda Item 25: Other issues to be considered by the Technical Commission

IN SUPPORT OF GLOBAL STANDARDS ON GROUND HANDLING

(Presented by Aviation Services Association - ASA World)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper embraces the need for Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) on ground handling in line with ICAO's Strategic Goals. The ground handling industry is principally self-regulated with ground handling organizations reliant on industry-developed manuals and contractual norms. Although the industry-developed material is robust and comprehensive, self-regulation leaves inconsistencies across jurisdictions amidst weakened State oversight. This leads to critical safety and efficiency gaps. The recent adoption of Amendment 18 to Annex 14 — *Aerodromes, Volume I — Aerodrome Design and Operations* by the ICAO Council at its 234th Session is a pivotal milestone. ASA World commends this advancement, which introduces key provisions to enhance safety oversight of ground handling and apron management services—strengthening protections for aircraft, personnel, and aerodrome infrastructure. These efforts reflect a shift toward recognizing ground handling as a core element of aerodrome operations. The developments are complemented by proposed amendments to Annexes 6 — *Operation of Aircraft* and 9 — *Facilitation and Procedures for Air Navigation Services — Aerodromes* (PANS-Aerodromes, Doc 9981), spearheaded by ICAO panels and task forces. ASA World supports this momentum and encourages further work toward a globally harmonized regulatory framework that addresses persistent safety oversight gaps.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This information paper relates to Strategic Goals: <i>Every Flight is Safe and Secure</i> ; and <i>No Country Left Behind</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	No

<i>References:</i>	<i>ACI-ASA Ground Handling Service Provider and Airport Operator Agreement</i> <i>Template ASA World Policy Handbook</i> <i>EU Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2025/20 amending Regulation (EU) No 965/2012</i> <i>IATA Airport Handling Manual (AHM)</i> <i>IATA Cargo Handling Manual (ICHM)</i> <i>IATA Ground Operations Manual (IGOM)</i> <i>ICAO Amendment 18 to the International Standards and Recommended Practices, Annex 14 — Aerodromes, Volume I — Aerodrome Design and Operations</i> <i>Doc 10121, ICAO Manual on Ground Handling</i> <i>ICAO Strategic Goals</i>
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ground handling operations, encompassing both passenger and cargo services, are integral to the safety and efficiency of the entire air transport system. The sector directly employs 1.1 million staff across the world in a variety of jobs representing, on average, 20 per cent of airport-employed staff. When other jobs are included through the ground handling supply chain, this amounted to close to 3 million people worldwide in 2023.

1.2 The Aviation Services Association (ASA World) is the leading global voice for ground and cargo handling, spearheading the reform and transformation of the sector worldwide. In line with ICAO's Strategic Goal – *Every Flight is Safe and Secure* – ASA World is committed to promoting a culture of continuous safety improvement and advocating for a robust, globally standardized regulatory framework for the ground and cargo handling sector. While aviation is highly standardized in many areas (e.g., flight operations, aerodromes), ground handling remains a unique, ubiquitous activity with direct impacts on ramp and flight safety that lacks fully harmonized international standards under ICAO.

1.3 The standardization of global processes for ground handling is critical for safe and efficient aviation operations. A uniform approach to processes allows aviation stakeholders to use a common protocol worldwide irrespective of the airport or jurisdiction. Moreover, predictable and consistent processes reduce safety incidents and improve operational economics – aircraft turnaround times and passenger handling – allowing both aircraft operators and ground handlers to reduce costs.

1.4 With respect to human capital development, a global standard is also useful for ground handling organizations that operate across airports and multiple jurisdictions in transferring know-how and streamlining their staff training efforts. Thus, standardization allows stakeholders to not only minimize safety risks through a common curriculum but also achieve economies of scale in the deployment of training programs, quality control and operations.

2. CHALLENGES OF SELF-REGULATION

2.1 In the absence of harmonized Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs), the industry has relied on guidance materials developed collaboratively by stakeholders – International Air Transport Association (IATA), aircraft operators, Airports Council International (ACI), airport operators, ASA World, and ground handlers. Examples of the developed tools, which are deemed robust by the industry and aim to harmonize ground handling standards and operations, include the IATA Ground

Operations Manual (IGOM), IATA Cargo Handling Manual (ICHM) and IATA Airport Handling Manual (AHM). These manuals outline the procedures and ground handling processes. Other guidance material has been developed by ICAO – *Manual on Ground Handling* (Doc 10121). While Doc 10121 provides an overview of accepted best practice in the industry, it has not been regarded as a standard setting document by itself. As such, the industry has remained largely self-regulated often applying contracts on a bilateral basis (e.g., through the IATA Standard Ground Handling Agreement - SGHA) between ground handlers and aircraft operators.

2.2 The reliance on self-regulation and industry-developed standards in ground handling has led to significant inconsistencies both across jurisdictions and between airports within the same jurisdiction. Without a globally mandated framework, aircraft operators often implement divergent procedures, resulting in deviations from established industry practices. The lack of uniformity introduces safety risks and operational shortfalls. Furthermore, inconsistencies exist in governance and safety accountability models, which can fall primarily on the aircraft operator or the airport operator depending on the jurisdiction. This fragmented approach to ground handling oversight exposes the system to safety risks and operational inefficiencies.

2.3 Specific safety challenges persist, particularly in cargo handling. Undeclared dangerous goods (UDG), such as lithium batteries shipped without proper classification, pose significant fire and explosion risks. While freight forwarders have a responsibility, the liability and consequences often transfer to the attesting air cargo handlers. Effective safety oversight for such critical issues requires consistent State-level enforcement.

2.4 The existing safety oversight process is also inefficient. The current proliferation of duplicative audits where large ground handling organizations may spend up to 178 days annually undergoing primarily airline-driven audits that produce results estimated to be 80 per cent identical¹—diverts critical resources away from actual safety improvements. This inefficiency underscores the need for internationally harmonized approaches to ground handling oversight that reduce audit duplication while strengthening safety outcomes.

2.5 The European Union Aviation Safety Agency’s (EASA) adoption of ground handling regulations (EU 2025/20 amending Regulation No. 965/2012) represents a positive and commendable step toward harmonization. These regulations mark the first formal attempt by a major regulatory body to elevate ground handling oversight. However, as a regional initiative, the scope of EASA’s framework remains geographically limited to the European Union.

2.6 ASA World recommends that the structured development of dedicated SARPs draw upon the EU Ground Handling Regulation 2025/20 as a reference model, recognizing it as the first regionally harmonized framework for ground handling operations and a valuable foundation for building globally consistent oversight.

3. THE MOVE TOWARDS A GLOBAL STANDARD

3.1 ASA World applauds the progress related to the adoption of Amendment 18 to the *International Standards and Recommended Practices, Aerodromes – Aerodrome Design and Operations* (Annex 14, Volume I to the Convention on International Civil Aviation) by the ICAO Council at its 234th

¹ EASA, 2024. Ground handling requirements: Explanatory notes NPA 2023-106. Available at: https://www.easa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/dfu/npa_2023-106_-_ground_handling_requirements_explanatory_notes.pdf

Session on 28 March 2025. This amendment marks a milestone for the industry, introducing key provisions to enhance safety oversight of ground handling. By reducing accidents, incidents, and other occurrences involving aircraft, aerodrome facilities, and personnel, it will strengthen overall aviation safety. The provisions related to apron management service are also welcome, as they promote greater consideration of ground handling safety during aircraft stand manoeuvring—helping to protect both aircraft and ground personnel.

3.2 ASA World recognizes the valuable contributions by the Aerodrome Design and Operations Panel (ADOP/5) and its Ground Handling Task Force (GHTF). The proposed amendments to ICAO Annex 14, Volume I and associated documents represent a significant evolution in the treatment of ground handling as a critical element of aerodrome operations. These provisions are further complemented by amendments to Annex 6 (Parts I, II, III), Annex 9, and PANS-Aerodromes, establishing a globally harmonized approach to safety oversight, training, equipment use, and standardized operating procedures.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 The ground and cargo handling industry is embracing a paradigm shift in governance by calling on States to support the deployment of dedicated SARPs under the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The current reliance on industry-developed manuals and contractual norms leaves critical safety and efficiency gaps across jurisdictions, inconsistent with the GASP. ASA World commends the ICAO Council's adoption of Amendment 18 to Annex 14, Volume I – Aerodrome Design and Operations, at its 234th Session. This amendment as well as proposed amendments represent a key step forward in enhancing safety oversight of ground handling operations, reducing risks to personnel, aircraft, and infrastructure. The focus on apron management services is also a welcome development, reinforcing safety during aircraft stand manoeuvring.

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