



INFORMATION PAPER

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Agenda Item 14: Other Business

BASELINE SAFETY AND STATE OVERSIGHT OF GROUND HANDLING IN THE NEW EU REGULATIONS

(Presented by EASA)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2025, two new European Commission regulations on ground handling entered into force. They establish requirements for the safe provision of ground handling services and organisations providing them at EU aerodromes, and for a risk-based oversight by competent authorities of those organisations and services. The Regulations become applicable in March 2028, allowing a three-year implementation period.

This paper presents the European Union model of a proportionate and flexible approach to regulating ground handling, and highlights the similarities and differences from the ICAO standards and recommendations, with the aim of supporting regional dialogue and mutual learning in the Pan-American region.

<i>Strategic Goals 2026-2050:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every flight is safe and secure • Aviation is environmentally sustainable • Aviation delivers seamless, accessible, and reliable mobility for all • No country left behind
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1. Introduction

1.1 In 2018 the European Union’s basic aviation act extended its scope to ground handling, in a total system approach to aviation safety. Surveys and interviews with relevant industry stakeholders and competent authorities conducted prior to rulemaking activities, as well as extensive safety data collected through mandatory occurrence reporting since 2015 in the EU Member States provided sufficient information to determine clear safety issues in certain ground handling areas that needed to be addressed at regulatory level in order to improve safety in ground handling.

1.2 Through the EU ground handling regulations published on 7 March 2025, ground handling service providers become formally accountable and responsible for the safe provision of ground handling services provided at EU aerodromes. Furthermore, competent authorities of the EU Member States are responsible to conduct direct oversight of ground handling services provided at EU aerodromes and organisations providing them.

1.3 With one set of rules applicable to 30 EASA States, a safety baseline is established for all ground handling services provided at the aerodromes in those states. The regulations require a management system scalable to the size and complexity of their operations, with a focus on developing and fostering a safety culture and better reporting of safety events. The requirements enable harmonisation of operational procedures of aircraft operators and ground handling service providers, provide a solid legal ground for the continued use of industry standards (on a voluntary basis), and create the basis for a consistent and efficient risk-based oversight of ground handling services and the organisations providing them.

1.4 The regulations are expected to reduce the high number of audits done to ground handling service providers by air operators, and to reduce the aircraft ground damage during ground handling activities, amounting to 1.3 billion euro/year in Europe alone.

1.5 The objective of this paper is to share the EU experience as a potential reference for States seeking to enhance their oversight and regulatory approach to ground handling, in line with evolving ICAO SARPs.

2. Discussion

Context in the Pan American Region

2.1 In the Pan American region, ground handling is characterised by a wide diversity of regulatory approaches, operational scales, and levels of maturity. Many States rely on industry-driven standards or delegate oversight to aerodrome operators or airlines. Some have taken steps to enhance their frameworks through ICAO guidance. However, oversight capacity remains uneven, and consistent implementation across service providers continues to pose challenges. The EU, through technical cooperation activities, is actively supporting regulatory development in the region, which may also include in ground handling.

ICAO Ground Handling Framework

2.2 The ICAO gradual approach on ground handling entails publication and implementation of standards and recommended practices (SARPs) in two distinct phases, according to the guidelines provided at the High Level Covid-19 Conference in 2021 (HLCC) and with the ‘No country left behind’ principle. The first phase, applicable as of 26 November 2026, contains a standard requiring States to regularly assess the impact of ground handling operations on aviation safety. States are also recommended to establish criteria for the oversight of ground handling as part of their State Safety Programme. The second phase – recently announced through a State Letter expected in July 2025 – proposes additional recommendations in Annex 14 on State oversight to be conducted directly or indirectly, through aerodrome operators or aircraft operators or both, and States to promote standardised procedures for ground handling. Several new proposed standards address training of personnel to ensure their competence, proper operation and use of ground support equipment, and the implementation of a maintenance programme for that equipment. Further details are added in PANS-Aerodromes, addressing harmonization and collaboration, documentation, training, safety management and operations and facilities pertaining to ground handling service providers.

2.3 The implementation of a safety management system by ground handling service providers remains at the discretion of States and is referred to only in PANS-Aerodromes. The package of new SARPs shows progress towards monitoring and improving the safety performance of ground handling service providers and their services. However, there still remains a significant amount of uncertainty towards achieving an effective safety risk management in this domain.

Current Challenges in Ground Handling Oversight

2.4 Today, ground handling, a safety-critical area of aviation, is largely self-regulated. Ground handling service providers apply a safety management system on a voluntary basis or at the request of aircraft operators to which they provide services, subject to bilateral service agreements that cover all operational aspects, training of personnel, operation of ground support equipment, operational procedures. Industry applies auditing programmes to monitor and improve safety of operations, but these may prove to be beyond the financial capabilities of small or medium-size organisations. Despite the voluntary implementation of the reliable industry standards on a significant scale, a minimum level of safety achieved by the entire ground handling industry has not been attained.

2.5 Current and coming SARPs allow States to choose not to get involved in oversight of ground handling services and therefore remain outside of any feedback loop directly addressed to those organisations’ safety issues, the oversight process might be lacking impartiality. They also allow States to choose whether a safety management system for ground handling organisations becomes a (mandatory) requirement or remains optional. The current and future SARPs on ground handling do not specify or suggest means to help States to collect safety data, which leaves the initial problem unaddressed: in the absence of relevant and sufficient safety data, the safety criticality of ground handling operations is difficult to measure, assess and address effectively.

Key Features of the EU Regulatory Approach

2.6 In line with the direction promoted by ICAO, but going beyond the current and coming SARPs, the new EU Ground Handling safety regulations¹ establish minimum safety standards that will become mandatory as of 27 March 2028. Organisations will need to prove that they have a management system in place, proportionately aligned to the size of their organisation and the complexity of their operations.

2.7 This management system includes a safety management system, training for staff, a maintenance programme for ground support equipment, a compliance monitoring process, and defined operational procedures, together with a robust safety culture, where any safety issues are reported without penalty to the reporter, swiftly addressed, and used as a lesson to further improve safety in the provision of services.

2.8 Organisations may show compliance with the operational requirements either by applying operational procedures developed by themselves or by applying industry standards and good practices developed and continually improved by industry during the past decades.

2.9 The EU regulatory package also ensures the exchange of relevant safety information among ground handling service providers, aircraft operators and aerodrome operators whenever the safety performance of one organisation affects that of the other organisation with which it interacts in common activities. The rules enable aircraft operators to agree on using the same operational procedures as the ground handling service providers when these procedures are based on the same industry standards as those used by the aircraft operator. To discourage the multitude of operational practices representing as many deviations from the standards in servicing the same aircraft type, the rules require an additional step, for air operators to perform a safety assessment of any deviation from those industry standards and best practices, as often those deviations have no added safety value but create more safety risks for the personnel providing those services.

2.10 The EU rules enable voluntary use of industry standards and best practices in ground handling as long as those standards and practices meet certain quality criteria, established in the EASA regulatory material as acceptable means of compliance (AMC), meet the objectives of the Ground Handling Regulation, and are assessed by EASA and the Member States together, in a common process, with one final result acknowledged by all Member States.

¹ [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2025/20](#) laying down the requirements for the safe provision of ground handling services and for organisations providing them, and [Commission Implementing Regulation \(EU\) 2025/23](#) laying down rules as regards for the oversight of ground handling service providers. Additionally, and part of the same regulatory package on ground handling, three other amending regulations establish the appropriate interfaces with 3 other significant domains and their regulations: air operations ([Regulation \(EU\) 2025/24](#)), aerodrome operations ([Regulation \(EU\) 2025/21](#)), and information security management ([Regulation \(EU\) 2025/22](#)).

2.11 State oversight becomes mandatory and is directly conducted by the competent authorities of the EU Member States. This becomes the prerogative of the State and no longer the responsibility of aircraft operators or aerodrome operators. These, on the other hand, continue to remain responsible to verify compliance of ground handling service providers with specific aspects of their operations manuals, respectively aerodrome manuals and procedures.

Facilitating Oversight Efficiency and Cooperation

2.12 State oversight of ground handling services and organisations providing them is regulated through a risk-based approach. The regulations are based on a declaration regime, where organisations declare their compliance with the applicable requirements. This means that there is no approval by the competent authority before the organisations start operating or continue operating at the time when the regulations become applicable. This way, ground handling service providers take full responsibility for compliance with the regulations. States will later exercise their control and verification of service providers for compliance with the ground handling requirements according to an oversight programme and plan implemented within a standard 4-year cycle, which can be extended or reduced, depending on the organisation's safety performance.

2.13 Regulation (EU) 2025/23 provides for an efficient approach on the oversight of ground handling organisations especially for the case when they provide services in more than one Member State. State oversight is expected to avoid multiple verifications of the same activities and organisational aspects, and gradually reduce the significant number of audits performed mostly by aircraft operators.

2.14 The rules on oversight also cater for the typical business model in ground handling, where one provider has a regional or continental footprint, being present in more than one State. The regulation uses the concept of cooperative oversight to a great extent, as all competent authorities involved in the oversight of the same ground handling service provider use the same checklists in all Member States; they also use one digital platform to share the audit results, corrective actions and relevant documents among them to avoid duplications of audits with the same scope and to enable them to focus on the elements of operation specific to the station that is subject to oversight at a given time.

2.15 Cooperative oversight rules enable constant and consistent communication among all competent authorities, common training and exchange of experience, to ensure a harmonised and efficient oversight process, and reduce the audit burden on organisations. The results of audits and inspections of the competent authorities can be then used by the ground handling organisation to prove compliance with the regulation to any auditors representing the aircraft operators to which they provide services.

3. Conclusion

3.1 The European model illustrates the potential for clear baseline safety requirements, combined with flexible implementation, cooperative oversight, and recognition of industry standards, to significantly enhance ground handling safety and reduce regulatory burden. While regulatory approaches must be tailored to national and regional contexts, some elements of the EU framework may offer a useful reference for the Pan-American States as they implement or expand their own oversight systems in alignment with ICAO SARPs.

3.2 The Meeting is invited to note the information contained in this Paper.

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