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If you want cleaner skies, then ban old, dirty aircraft

Executive view: **easyJet**'s chief executive, says policy and technology must work together

Andy Harrison

Today, easyJet collects its hundredth A319 from Airbus in Hamburg before the aircraft embarks on a tour of some of Europe's leading capital cities. The 100 aircraft have been delivered in 3½ years, meaning that easyJet has taken an A319 into its fleet every 12 days.

This is part of easyJet's €6 billion (£4 billion) investment in European aviation, which directly supports tens of thousands of jobs and indirectly hundreds of thousands.

Some will see this as an example of an airline growing irresponsibly fast, to the detriment of the environment. I would argue that this is exactly the type of technological shift from old to new aircraft, and from the old business model to modern, efficient business practices, that is pivotal to improving the environmental efficiency of aviation and achieving "green growth".

New aircraft are cleaner and quieter than older aircraft. Our A319s are 15 per cent more fuel-efficient than the 737-300s they have replaced in our fleet. This week, Boeing claimed that the 787-9 will burn 27 per cent less fuel per passenger than the older-generation A340-300 that it could replace in some fleets.

It is clearly understood that different cars pollute at different levels, yet there is no such understanding for aircraft.

Given the longevity of aircraft (it is not unusual for 30-year-old aircraft to still be operating commercial flights), a mix of carrot and stick is required — airlines need to be incentivised to operate the cleaner, newer technology while being subject to regulations once aircraft reach a certain age.

It is for this reason that easyJet is calling on European governments today to remove almost 700 of the oldest, dirtiest aircraft from Europe's skies by banning any aircraft built before 1990 from operating within the European Union after January 1, 2012. The requirement would then roll forward each year, so no aircraft would operate in Europe older than 22 years of age.

This would mean that about 20 per cent of Europe's aircraft would be forced from the skies within five years, including freighter aircraft, which is often where older aircraft end up.

There is a precedent for such collective action. Today's aircraft are typically 75 per cent quieter than jets in the 1960s due to the prohibition of the noisiest aircraft types over the past 30 years.

Europe's governments should also seek to remove blockages that have stood in the way of the longstanding proposals to rationalise Europe's patchwork of nearly 40 air traffic control centres and flightpaths, which, it has been estimated, could cut European aviation CO2 emissions by 12 per cent.

Initiatives such as these could be undertaken relatively simply if the political will existed and, taken together, would improve the performance of Europe's airlines by some 20 per cent without politicians needing to raise ticket prices through taxation.

However, by far the greatest environmental benefits will come through advances in aircraft and engine technologies being worked on right now.

EasyJet is already having discussions with manufacturers about the new generation of planes that will take to the skies by 2015. These aircraft, with revolutionary engine and fuselage designs, will go a long way towards achieving the targets the industry has set for itself to reduce CO₂ emissions by 50 per cent; noise emissions by 50 per cent; and nitrous oxide emissions by 80 per cent by 2020.

The industry is, therefore, committed to playing a full part in minimising its environmental contribution, but there is a role for governments in ensuring that their policies incentivise the right behaviour.

Aviation is highly international, and regulation needs to be well thought through and internationally coordinated to avoid local market distortions.

The Chancellor's recent doubling of Air Passenger Duty (APD) is a classic example of how not to do it. APD is a stealth tax masquerading as a green tax. It provides no incentive for airlines to operate the cleanest aircraft; it omits air freight and private jets; the proceeds are not allocated to any scheme to improve the environment; and it is disproportionate — on a UK domestic return flight, the £20 APD is now 25 per cent of the average fare and about ten times the cost of offsetting the carbon emitted on an easyJet flight.

Surely a better tax would be one that encouraged consumers to make a choice between one airline and another based on financial incentives.

This is being worked on at European level, where a scheme to allow airlines to buy and sell carbon credits will be introduced from 2011. This will put a price on carbon emissions and put aviation on the same footing as other industries. Those airlines that choose to operate the cleanest aircraft will need to buy the fewest credits — which will be passed on to passengers in the form of lower fares.

This would also have the positive effect of encouraging airlines to use their assets more efficiently. EasyJet's mix of new aircraft with high seat densities and high load factors means that a traditional airline emits 27 per cent more CO₂ per passenger kilometre than easyJet. Over our last financial year, easyJet emitted 95.7g CO₂ per passenger kilometre, which means that an easyJet passenger's carbon footprint is less than the 104g CO₂ per kilometre of the Toyota Prius.

Over the next decade there is enormous potential for greener growth in our industry. People don't need to stop flying, but airlines need to educate consumers to make environmentally informed choices.

The industry needs to invest in new technology and modern practices. Crucially, policy-makers need to drive intelligent, internationally coordinated regulation to encourage the most efficient behaviour.

In the air

Too dirty too fly?

Air France 29 aircraft pre1990 (ten Boeing 747s, 19 Airbus A320s)

Alitalia 29 (all MD82s)

British Airways 20 (three Boeing 737-300s, seven 747-400s, one 757, three 767s, six Airbus A320s)

DHL Air 22 (all Boeing 757-200s)

Jet2.com 28 (21 Boeing 737-300s, seven 757-200s)

KLM 21 (ten Boeing 737-300s, five 737-400s, six Boeing 747-400s)

Lufthansa 39 (15 Boeing 737-300s, six 747-400s, nine Airbus 300s, nine 320s)

SAS 19 (all MD82s)

Source: AirCraft Analytical System