Sustainable Cabin: Cabin Waste and Single Use Plastics (SUP)

Fact Sheet

The airline sector faces challenges associated with improved cabin waste performance and the replacement of single=use plastic products (SUPP) with sustainable alternatives. In addition, airlines face technical and operational obstacles, and the lack of harmonized and risk-based regulations presents a significant barrier to improving circularity and waste management.

Cabin Waste

Background

The airline sector has been criticized for the lack of reuse and recycling of its cabin products, but the lack of smart regulation will continue to constrain airline efforts to improve performance as all cabin waste is subject to national waste management controls that limit pollution.

Many countries have gone further with their regulations, introducing restrictions on catering waste from international flights to protect their agricultural sector (with respect to animal health). These restrictive requirements preclude the reuse and recycling of airline meals and cabin products from international flights.

Airlines and their catering providers have an opportunity to reduce cabin waste by improving planning and logistics. Cabin waste audits commissioned by IATA indicate that **34%** of cabin waste is untouched food and beverages which means the sector is incinerating or landfilling **$6bn** worth of resources per year. The regulations reduce the sector's ability to help build a circular economy and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target to cut global food waste in half by 2030. Airlines and their service providers must work collaboratively with regulators to ensure that aviation makes a positive contribution to this SDG target.

IATA Activities

- A major obstacle to airlines' ability to reuse and recycle more cabin waste is the International Catering Waste (ICW) legislation that many governments have adopted. These regulations aim to reduce the risk of transferring animal diseases by requiring ICW to be subject to special treatment. IATA commissioned an update to the "International Catering Waste – A case for Smarter Regulation" study to understand the risks posed by airline catering waste on animal health. It advocates the adoption of smarter regulation which allows reuse and recycling while maintaining animal health controls.

- IATA has coordinated a European campaign that seeks a regulatory review and has published a joint statement "Towards Smarter Regulation of International Catering Waste (Category 1) in Aviation". To date, the statement has been endorsed by 44 aviation organizations including 9 associations, 22 airlines, 2 caterers and 11 airports. Further advocacy efforts around this campaign led to the EU Commission publishing clarifications about the Animal By-Products Regulation.

- IATA recognizes that both animal and human pandemics are bad for business and the risk assessment report commissioned by IATA indicated that the main threat of disease transfer was posed by meat products smuggled in passenger baggage. IATA has organized webinars jointly with the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) on minimizing the spread of African Swine Fever (ASF) in air transport. The aim of the campaign is to inform passengers of the dangers of smuggling pork products.

- IATA commissioned a new set of Cabin Waste Composition Audits (CWCA), that indicates that the average passenger generates roughly 0.94 kg of waste per flight. In collaboration with the Aviation Sustainability Forum (ASF), IATA has updated the Airline Waste Analysis Methodology and working toward a standardized approach to conduct the audits and collect data that supports advocacy efforts.

- IATA has published a [cabin waste handbook](#) that promotes a holistic approach to cabin waste management, with a focus on waste minimization, reuse and recycling. The handbook identifies 23 actions that could be initiated by airlines, manufacturers and service providers to improve waste performance. It aims to drive technology development and uptake and supporting service contracts that promote waste minimization and recycling, and ultimately leads to the adoption of long-term sustainable solutions.

- IATA is coordinating its activities with other aviation associations including the Airline Catering Association (ACA), International Flight Services Association (IFSA) and the Aviation Sustainability Forum (ASF).

- IATA, together with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), is working on a program to allows for continuous recycling of aluminum, paper, and plastic products used during international flights arriving in the United States.

More info: www.iata.org/cabin-waste

Single-Use Plastics

Background

The inappropriate disposal of single-use plastic products (SUPP) and its impact on the marine environment is a key challenge for our society. Although SUPP are widely used in aviation due to its strength, lightness and hygienic properties, voluntary action by airlines has demonstrated that the sector is keen to replace these products with more sustainable alternatives.

However, international airlines are facing challenges with differing SUPP regulations being implemented at airport, regional and national levels. Asymmetric SUPP regulations will result in differing alternative products being introduced on separate legs of a journey, confusing passengers and crew, increasing compliance costs, and generating more waste.

These emerging regulations do not recognize that alternatives to SUPP must meet strict aviation security and hygiene constraints and that replacement should be based on a lifecycle approach that takes emissions from flight operations into account. IATA has also identified asymmetric national SUPP bans that are problematic for international airlines, and we are raising awareness of these concerns with the relevant regulators. Many airlines have taken a proactive approach to the challenge of SUPP by removing straws and drink stirrers and introducing bio-based cutlery, crockery, and packaging solutions.

IATA Activities

- IATA's activities related to SUP are led by the Sustainability and Environment Advisory Council (SEAC). SEAC has formed a Sustainable Cabin Working Group that aimed to identify and review single-use plastic issues, emerging legislation, and technology and provided a platform for airlines to share best practices and advise on areas that require technical support, research or regulatory engagement. The Sustainable Cabin Working Group prepared guidance on the harmonization of SUPP regulations for regulators.

- At IATA's 79th Annual General Meeting (AGM), IATA and UNEP signed a Memorandum of Understanding to address this triple crisis and act jointly on diverse sustainability challenges in the aviation industry. The initial focus of this partnership is reducing problematic SUPP and improving the circularity in the use of plastics by the industry.

- In April 2024, IATA released the [Reassessing Single-Use Plastic Products in the Airline Sector report](#) to assist airlines, regulators, and the airline supply chain to mitigate the environmental impacts of single-use plastic products (SUPP) and develop, adapt, and implement the solutions best suited to an aircraft's unique environment. This report provides visibility to the challenges faced by the air transport industry when it comes to SUPP along with practical recommendations to the industry and its various stakeholders, including regulators. Collaboration across the aviation value chain is vital to enable circular economy principles, while seeking for a sectoral approach to facilitate the reduction and replacement of SUPP.

- IATA is developing a harmonized lifecycle assessment (LCA) methodology for single-use plastic products (SUPP) and reusable alternatives in the airline sector that can be applied globally and consistently assess different product alternatives for passenger and cargo items. In September 2024, IATA formed a Technical Advisory Group to provide inputs on key elements of the methodology.