

Airlines' efforts to cut food waste: small steps for a growing problem

Antonis Mavropoulos, April 30, 2017 (<https://wastelessfuture.com/news/airlines-efforts-to-cut-food-waste-small-steps-for-a-growing-problem/>), 0

Although aviation is a relatively small industry, it has a disproportionately large impact (<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/issues/climate-change/science/climate-change-basics/air-travel-and-climate-change/>) on the climate system. It accounts for four to nine per cent of the total climate change impact of human activity. It burns the equivalent of more than 5m barrels of oil (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jan/16/how-airlines-can-fly-around-new-carbon-rules>) a day, adding up to around 2.5% of all carbon dioxide pollution, in addition to nitrogen oxides, soot, and water vapor, which place an even bigger burden on the world's climate.

But apart from carbon emissions, for which one might easily suspect the industry in question, an additional environmental issue arises when it comes to aviation, one not so obvious to identify; plastic cutlery, fully packaged ready meals, one use cups, single serve dairy drinks, unopened beverages, miniature wine bottles, half-eaten lunch trays, unused toothbrushes. In other words, waste.

Airline passengers generated 5.2m tonnes of waste in 2016 (<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/apr/01/airline-food-waste-landfill-incineration-airports-recycling-iberia-qantas-united-virgin>), most of which went to landfill or incineration, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) (<http://www.iata.org/Pages/default.aspx>) estimates. That's the weight of about 2.6m cars. And it's a figure set to double over the next 15 years.

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(http://wastelessfuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Fotolia_65649276_XS.jpg)

For the past few years, there have been commitments made to tackle air pollution and greenhouse gasses, albeit without the expected or promised results given the sector's substantial growth during the last decade. Similarly, there have been some initiatives (<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/apr/01/airline-food-waste-landfill-incineration-airports-recycling-iberia-qantas-united-virgin>) targeted to reducing waste generated by airlines, as a small sample of their rising awareness towards the issue.

Iberia Airlines and Ferrovial Services agreed on a scheme aiming to recover 80% of cabin waste coming into Madrid's Barajas airport by mid-2020 through simple measures such as using trolleys designed for waste separation and training almost 2,500 cabin crew members for the task. The program is also exploring the option of low-packaging meals and reusable cutlery, as well as data-led solutions: frequent flyer information, for example, could be used to anticipate business class passengers' meal preferences, meaning fewer meals would need to be prepared to satisfy demand.

Last year, Gatwick (<http://www.mediacentre.gatwickairport.com/press-releases/2016/16-02-22-carbon-tsar-appointed-to-ensure-gatwick-becomes-uk-leading-low-carbon-airport.aspx>) opened an on-site waste-to-energy plant, reducing the need for lorries to transport waste elsewhere. The power produced currently goes back into the plant, but Gatwick hopes the facility will eventually help to heat the north terminal. Like Heathrow, it is also targeting (<http://www.mediacentre.gatwickairport.com/press-releases/2016/16-02-22->



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carbon-tsar-appointed-to-ensure-gatwick-becomes-uks-leading-low-carbon-airport.aspx) a 70% recycling rate by 2020. America's United Airlines has switched to compostable paper cups and last year began donating unused amenity kits to homeless and women's shelters, aiming to divert more than 27 tonnes-worth by the end of the first year. Virgin America, a company once under the Most Eco-Friendly Airline moniker (<https://www.virginamerica.com/cms/about-our-airline/press/2010/named-most-eco-friendly-airline>), meanwhile, has set up a system for recycling all parts of its headsets, including ear sponges, which are used as flooring for equestrian centers.

Despite all the effort and all commitments made to uphold it, the industry's waste generation continues, while tremendously increasing the cost; cabin waste costs the industry \$500m per year, according to IATA, a figure that it says is rising faster than waste volumes thanks to growing disposal costs. Bringing this down will require airlines to take a different approach to procurement, such as investing in cabin products designed with waste minimization in mind and durable materials instead of disposables. The improvement of EU regulations is also a key factor, since the EU animal health legislation, drawn up as a reaction to diseases like foot and mouth, dictates that all catering waste arriving from outside EU borders be treated as high-risk and incinerated or buried in high depth landfills. A coffee cup from the US, for example, will be treated as hazardous waste because it might have had milk in it. Donating uneaten food to charity is impossible.

Better procedures on the ground would help ease waste classification problems. East Midlands and Gatwick airports have started tagging rubbish bags with their origin but elsewhere it's common practice for waste from inside and outside the EU to get thrown together and processed collectively as international catering waste.

Some airlines prioritize value, others luxury, but nevertheless there is plenty of room for some that prioritize sustainability, assuming a good reputation is a motive as important as cutting the costs of their current mode of operation. Certainly, there are a lot of efficient and profitable initiatives and guidelines awaiting implementation, but just as it happens with gas emissions, changes, unfortunately, are neither radical nor fast enough to make any actual difference. What they very well may be, is a baby step towards the right direction.

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