



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 plastics (SUP) products 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 of waste management. Although the pandemic slowed the growth in cabin waste volumes, the lack of smart regulation will continue to constrain airline efforts to improve the sustainability of cabin operations.

Cabin Waste

Background

The airline sector has been criticized for the lack of reuse and recycling of its cabin products and, although the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the growth in cabin waste volumes, the lack of smart regulation will continue to constrain airline efforts to improve performance.

All cabin waste is subject to national waste management controls that limit pollution, but many countries have gone further with their regulations, introducing restrictions on catering waste from international flights to protect their agricultural sector (in 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 wastes by improving planning and logistics. Cabin waste audits undertaken by IATA and number of airlines indicates that **20-25%** of cabin waste is untouched food and beverages and although the inflight catering market shrank during the pandemic this still means the sector is incinerating or landfilling **\$2-3bn** worth of resources. 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

- IATA's activities related to cabin waste are led by the Sustainability and Environment Advisory Council (SEAC). SEAC has formed a Sustainable Cabin Working Group that aims to identify and review cabin waste issues, emerging legislation and technology, and provides a platform for airlines to share best practices and advises on areas that require technical support, research or regulatory engagement.
- 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 a 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 which 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.
- 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 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 is working with partners on trials to further assess how to tackle cabin waste issues and provide solutions.

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

Single Use Plastics

Background

The inappropriate disposal of single-use plastics (SUP) and its impact on the marine environment is a key challenge for our society. Although SUP is 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 SUP regulations being implemented at airport, regional and national levels. Asymmetric SUP 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 SUP 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 SUP 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 SUP by removing straws and drinks stirrers and introducing bio-based cutlery, crockery and packaging solutions. However, many of these initiatives have stalled or been reversed as a result of the pandemic and the introduction of asymmetric regulations.

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- The Sustainable Cabin Working Group has prepared guidance on the harmonization of SUP 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 single-use plastic products 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.