Sustainable Cabin: Cabin Waste and Single Use Plastic Products

Fact Sheet

Overview

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 cabin products, but the lack of smart regulation will continue to constrain airlines' efforts to improve performance. All cabin waste is subject to national waste management rules designed to prevent pollution, and in many countries, even stricter regulations apply to catering waste from international flights to protect animal health. These rules effectively prevent the reuse and recycling of meals and cabin products from international flights.

Airlines and their catering providers can reduce cabin waste by improving planning and logistics. IATA's cabin waste audits indicate that 34% of cabin waste is untouched food and beverages, representing around $6 billion of resources incinerated or landfilled each year. Current regulations limit progress toward a circular economy and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of halving global food waste by 2030, making collaboration with regulators essential.

IATA's Activities

- A major barrier to greater reuse and recycling of cabin waste is International Catering Waste (ICW) legislation adopted by many governments to prevent the spread of animal disease. These rules require special treatment of catering waste, limiting reuse and recycling. To better understand the actual risks, IATA updated its study "International Catering Waste – A Case for Smarter Regulation", which calls for smarter regulations that maintain animal health control while enabling reuse and recycling.
- 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 pose serious risks to the airline industry. An IATA-commissioned risk assessment found that the main disease risk comes from meat products smuggled in passenger baggage. To address this, IATA has worked with the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) to raise awareness—through joint webinars—of the risks of spreading African Swine Fever (ASF) via air transport and the dangers of smuggling pork products.
- IATA commissioned a new set of Cabin Waste Composition Audits (CWCA), indicating 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 is working toward a standardized approach to conduct the audits and collect data that supports advocacy efforts.

- IATA has published a cabin waste handbook promoting a holistic approach to cabin waste management, focusing on waste minimization, reuse, and recycling. The handbook sets out 23 actions for airlines, manufacturers, and service providers to improve waste performance. It supports technological uptake and service contracts that reduce waste and increase recycling, with the goal of achieving long-term sustainable solutions.
- IATA coordinates its activities with other aviation associations, including the Airline Catering Association (ACA) and International Flight Services Association (IFSA).
- IATA, together with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), continues to work on a program to allow 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 Plastic Products (SUPP)

Background

The improper disposal of single-use plastic products (SUPP) and their impact on marine environments is a major societal challenge. While SUPP are widely used in aviation for their strength, light weight, and hygiene, airlines have shown through voluntary action that they are committed to replacing them with more sustainable alternatives.

However, international airlines face growing challenges due to inconsistent SUPP regulations at airports, regional and national levels. These mismatches can lead to different products being used on different legs of the same journey, confusing passengers and crew, increasing costs, and ultimately generating more waste.

Current regulations often fail to recognize that alternatives to SUPP must comply with strict aviation safety and hygiene requirements and should be assessed using a full lifecycle approach that also considers emissions from flight operations. IATA has identified asymmetric national SUPP bans that create challenges for international airlines and is raising these concerns with regulators. At the same time, many airlines have acted proactively by removing items such as straws and stirrers and introducing bio-based cutlery, crockery, and packaging.

IATA's Activities

- At IATA's 79th AGM, IATA and UNEP signed a MoU 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.
- IATA released the Reassessing Single-Use Plastic Products in the Airline Sector report to support airlines, regulators, and the supply chain in reducing the environmental impacts of SUPP and identifying solutions suited to the aircraft environment. The report highlights key challenges faced by air transport and provides practical recommendations for industry stakeholders, including regulators.
- Based on the SUPP report findings, IATA developed the LCA Methodology for Single-Use Plastic Products in the Airline Sector to consistently assess and compare single-use plastic products and their alternatives across the airline sector, for passengers and cargo items. Developed with input from a Technical Advisory Group and a public consultation, it reflects a broad range of aviation perspectives. This methodology was then tailored for cargo operations with the development of the LCA Guidance for Unit Load Devices, enabling standardized measuring and comparing of the environmental impacts of ULDs, their components, as well as accessories across their entire life cycle.

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