



Cabin Waste

Fact Sheet

Background

The airline industry has been cited for the lack of reuse and recycling of its cabin products. With continued global passenger growth, cabin waste volumes are set to increase significantly. Limited research by IATA indicates that the sector generated 5.7 million tonnes of cabin waste in 2017. In the absence of initiatives based on the circular economy and smart regulation, this waste volume could double in the next 10 years, based on current passenger growth rates.

IATA research indicates that over 20% of cabin waste comprises untouched food and drink and with an inflight catering market of \$15 billion in 2017, this represents a significant incentive to improve planning and logistics. Food waste is emerging as a global issue with up to one-third (1.3 billion tonnes) lost or wasted each year. This has been recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a specific target to cut global food waste per capita 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.

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.

The number and scope of regulations placing restrictions on single-use plastics (SUP) has increased significantly in-line with public interest and are aimed at addressing the problems of harmful marine litter. SUP have widespread use in inflight products including the provision of inflight meals and drinks (cutlery, food containers, beverage cups, plates, etc.) and inflight services (plastic wrapping for pillows, blankets, toiletries, headsets, etc.). Although not specifically focused on the aviation sector, many of these regulations have implications for airlines in terms of cost and availability. Given the strict rules on international catering waste, it is unlikely that SUP from aviation end up in the marine environment and also mean that alternative sustainable products will also be incinerated or buried in deep landfill. Alternatives to SUP such as crockery and glass may also result in increased CO₂ emissions owing to increased weight and water pollution from washing.

IATA Activities

- In 2012, IATA formed an ad hoc Cabin Waste Working Group to act as an advisor to the Environment Committee (ENCOM), on all matters related to cabin waste including identifying and reviewing emerging cabin waste issues, emerging legislation and technology, and providing a platform for airlines to share best practices. The Group provides advice to IATA's Aviation Environment Department on areas that require technical support, research or regulatory engagement.
- Because cabin waste is collected and managed by two different contractors (cleaners and caterers), undertaking a holistic cabin waste composition analysis is challenging for airlines. A standard cabin waste audit methodology was developed and tested at London's Heathrow Airport in a pilot study in 2012 and 2013.
- 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 and plant 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 recycling while maintaining animal health controls. Read the summary of [International catering waste: A case for smarter regulation](#) (pdf).
- IATA has commissioned the preparation of a cabin waste handbook that promotes a holistic approach to cabin waste management, with a focus on waste minimization, reuse and recycling. The handbook will serve as a guidance document for airlines, manufacturers and service providers – driving technology development and uptake and

supporting service contracts that promote waste minimization and recycling, and ultimately leading to the adoption of long-term sustainable solutions. The handbook has been reviewed by ENCOM and will be published online, with regular updates to reflect relevant developments.

- IATA supported the first 'Sustainable Cabin Forum' hosted by Hi Fly and the Mirpuri Foundation which took place on 16th May 2019. The forum focused on single use plastics and catering waste, bringing airlines and key government stakeholders together to identify practical solutions.

More info: <https://www.iata.org/policy/environment/Pages/cabin-waste.aspx>