

Information

25 June 2008

European airlines welcome European Commission's proposal to speed up Single European Sky

Airlines urge Member States to support and implement this crucial European project

The Association of European Airlines (AEA) has warmly welcomed the Second Package of Single European Sky (SES) legislation as adopted today by the European Commission.

With this latest move, the lengthy process to rationalise and modernise Europe's patchwork airspace takes a significant step forward. "This is a long-awaited response to problems experienced by passengers and airlines themselves", said Ulrich Schulte-Strathaus, Secretary General of the AEA. "The Single European Sky – once achieved – will reduce delays for passengers, and substantial amounts of unnecessary CO₂ emissions will be removed from the atmosphere".

Nevertheless, he warned, the most challenging part of the process was not the drafting of the legislation, but its implementation. "The reason we have a second package" he said, "is because the first, which saw the light of day four years ago, has stalled through reluctance on the part of EU Member States to pool their sovereign airspaces as a shared European resource – a kind of Schengen for the sky".

Under the current system, European airspace is carved up into small, country-shaped parcels, each overseen by its own control centre. Within each area, aircraft avoid areas restricted for military use. "There is inefficiency at every turn", said Mr Schulte-Strathaus, "within airspaces, and at the interface between airspaces. Hugely powerful systems on board aircraft, and hugely powerful radars on the ground, operate at a fraction of their capabilities because of the constraints imposed by these virtual frontiers in the air."

At the heart of the Single Sky process is the creation of a small number of 'Functional Airspace Blocks' grouping together several existing control areas according to established traffic flows, not national frontiers. These, and the system as a whole, will be required to meet performance targets. "This is the best way to maintain our high levels of safety, whilst at the same time improving efficiency," commented Mr. Schulte-Strathaus.

All safety aspects of air traffic management will, under the Single Sky process, be taken up by the European Aviation Safety Agency, which will become the de facto

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- Cyprus Airways
- Czech Airlines
- Finnair
- Iberia
- Icelandair
- Jat Airways
- KLM
- LOT
- Lufthansa
- Luxair
- Malev
- Olympic Airlines
- SAS Scandinavian Airlines
- Spanair
- SWISS
- TAP Portugal
- TAROM
- Turkish Airlines
- Ukraine International Airlines
- Virgin Atlantic Airways

safety regulator for all aspects of European aviation, another positive development according to Mr Schulte-Strathaus.

The Commission also intends to modernise the European air traffic control infrastructure through a technological programme called SESAR. AEA welcomes the work being conducted within SESAR, but stresses the need for public funding in particular to cover the transition costs from the present to the future system.

“This re-energising of the Single Sky process could not come at a more crucial time for the European airline industry”, said Mr Schulte-Strathaus. “Rocketing fuel prices are driving up airline costs at an alarming rate, as well as triggering economic effects which are impacting consumer demand. The viability of our industry is threatened, and we cannot continue to be burdened with the huge costs of en-route inefficiency, needlessly burning fuel which is three times as expensive as it was two years ago”.

Equally importantly, the environmental costs of airspace fragmentation have been highlighted with the move to extend emissions trading to aviation. For every year that the Single Sky remained unrealised following the introduction of an emissions trading scheme, airlines would have to acquire permits for an estimated 12 million tonnes of CO₂, arising from route inefficiencies. “Europe’s politicians must realise that the Single Sky is inseparable from their ambitious climate change targets”, said Ulrich Schulte-Strathaus.

His comments echoed those of Peter Hartman, Chairman of the AEA and President & CEO of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines: “We are delighted with this significant first step towards a Single European Sky as it will eventually benefit the passengers with more efficient flights, the environment with less emissions, and the airlines with reduced costs.”

“The Single European Sky concept depends primarily on national governments’ commitment to a vision of a borderless sky. AEA pins its hopes on the Transport Ministers of EU Member States taking the right decisions when they meet in October of this year. The stakes could not be higher – for the airlines, their passengers and the environment”.

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Note to the Editor: The Association of European Airlines (AEA) brings together 33 European established service and scheduled network carriers. These collectively carry 346 million passengers and 6 million tonnes of cargo each year, operating 2,540 aircraft serving 605 destinations in 161 countries with 11,115 flights a day. They provide around 375,600 jobs directly, and generate a total turnover of €75 billion.