A Global First for flybe

■ by ffinlo Costain

Flybe has become the first airline in the world to introduce an eco-labelling scheme on its aircraft – a move that's been warmly welcomed by the UK Government.

In recent years aviation has come in for some pretty rampant criticism, but while there are those within the environmental movement who view the world in the polarised terms of right or wrong, there are others who understand that adaptation to meet the challenge presented by global warming must go hand in hand with stability, or growth, in the economy.

Mike Rutter, Flybe's Chief Commercial Director, is well aware of this schism: 'We get sensible engagement from some of the leading lights who understand the balance that needs to be struck between business and the environment: Jonathon Porritt is balanced and constructive. Others regard the aviation industry as the devil's work.'

Mr Rutter readily acknowledges that aviation is part of the global warming problem - it emits millions of tonnes of CO2 each year: 'What we've tried to do is to accept that we have an effect on the climate, and I've gone out to provide what the Stern report recommended, which is to provide consumers with information to allow them to make informed choices – the belief in the Stern report being that this would actually lead to changes in the market place.'

Aviation, of course, isn't the only contributor to greenhouse gases, and it's an important part of the way many of us live our lives. If all of our on-the-ground energy was generated from renewable sources; if our cars were hybrid; if we used less electricity instead of rushing to buy the latest flat screen TV and leaving it on standby – then aviation per se wouldn't be a problem. There's also currently no scientific consensus about how we calculate the CO2 emitted by planes.

I spoke with Michael Buick of Climate Care, one of the UK's leading carbon offset companies. He described some of the problems associated with trying to accurately calculate aviation emissions; for example, the damage caused may depend on whether the 'plane flies above or below the contrail level (the height at which you start to see the exhaust); it may depend on whether the 'plane is travelling during the day or by night (during the day more heat, trapped by the CO2, may be reflected off clouds); and there is the problem of assigning responsibility fairly between freight users and passengers. To try and come to a reasonable conclusion on this issue (based on the most up to date scientific data) Climate Care has worked with Oxford University researchers and taken the decision to multiply the actual CO2 used by aeroplanes by 2 (other companies may chose different multiplication rates). This decision was taken in mid-2005, but as a result of a further review process with the University the multiplier may actually reduce in the future.

A further problem is that environmentalists have been so successful in raising the profile of CO2 emissions associated with aviation, that sea ferry companies have largely been excluded from scrutiny.

Mark Woodward, CEO of Isle of Man Steam Packet, is keen to perpetuate current assumptions: 'Shipping is generally recognised as much more environmentally friendly than air travel. An increasing number of people are switching away from air travel for environmental reasons and as ferries supply lifeline food and supplies to the Isle of Man it could be argued that passengers and cars on a vessel like Ben-my-Chree have no added environmental impact. We are working with an industry wide investigation on this conducted by the Passenger Shipping Association, and will look at ways to advise customers.'

The research from this investigation is not yet available, but old ferries do emit vast amounts of CO2. There also appears to be a general consensus amongst independent researchers that fast craft ferries, such as the Sea Cat, are likely to be as bad (or even worse) in terms of emissions per passenger, than small, efficient aeroplanes.

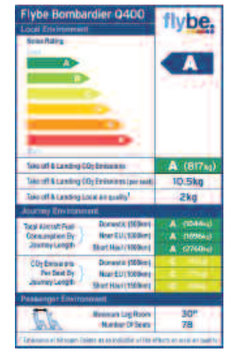
Mike Rutter said: 'I always find it amusing when I look at particularly London-based journalists who do articles on travel and the environment. They automatically assume aviation's bottom of the trail. Actually, if you look at the average passenger ship, then its carbon footprint is substantially worse per passenger than an aeroplane. There's been no interest [in eco-labelling] from any of the ferry companies, who've gone on record as saying that most of their fast ferries in particular burn fuel as if it's going out of fashion.'

> Eco-labelling gives consumers the power to make informed choices

That the issue is complicated is certain. Flybe's view is that the best way of addressing the recommendations of the Stern report, which assessed the economic impacts of global climate change for the first time, is to provide their passengers with information.

Eco-labelling isn't new. I remember sessions 10 years ago in Geneva where NGOs were arguing for UN schemes that graded products based on their environmental impact. But, governments fear unilateral action and powerful WTO members have so far successfully argued against a more multilateral approach.

One of the most successful and comprehensive examples of eco-labelling has been in the white goods industry. Flybe's scheme for grading aeroplanes is similar: 'The aviation industry is fighting for the public right to continue doing what it does. There's rightful concern about climate change. This means that if we want to continue to have a brand and a business that's supported by the majority of UK and Island communities, then we have to be seen to be doing something about it. We took a view that we'd try and do something that talked directly to the public.



'Eco-labelling gives consumers comparative information, and the power to make informed choices – meaning they can alter their behaviour by choosing an airline that has a lower carbon footprint or noise footprint rate for the journey they were going to fly. We've adapted the white goods model and integrated it into our own business,' explained Mr Rutter.

This is certainly an innovative approach, but is it good business sense? Mr Rutter knows his responsibilities are first and foremost to shareholders: 'Ultimately that's about profitability, but actually, wanting to serve the shareholders and reduce CO2 emissions goes hand in hand because as we go forward consumers won't allow any brand to exist that doesn't act in a way which is seen to be consistent with long term sustainability.' Mr Rutter hopes Flybe's environmental innovation will be rewarded by the travelling consumer, but recognises that it isn't just his company that has efficient aircraft: 'Ryan Air's 737 800 would come out of it reasonably well, and the A319 flown by Easy Jet would probably do okay. The 66 seat EuroManx ATR wouldn't do badly either. But there are some other planes that would be fairly awful.'

The fact that flights from the Isle of Man are below the contrail height is also something of a plus: 'Our Q400s don't get up to a level where contrails (which start at around 26 or 27,000 feet) are relevant. A lot of people think domestic aviation is worse – but you don't get the radiated effect.' Their fleet is also propeller driven rather than jet - another factor which suggests flying to and from the Isle of Man could be perceived as more environmentally responsible than taking the Sea Cat.

Mr Rutter also believes eco-labelling should be done across other forms of transport: 'Rail is more eco-friendly providing the passenger densities exist. If you measure Manchester to London you're always going to get a better outcome with rail because the passenger densities are there. But when you get a 125 service going down past Exeter towards Penzance then the carbon footprint on them – hmm, not particularly good… fine up to Plymouth… but… pretty awful after that…! Where the rail network works, which is largely radial and into London, we don't operate. We do it here because our services operate over water – not much of a rail option across the Irish Sea!'

Mr Rutter is also pleased with the recognition Flybe has received at UK Governmental level. 'It's a good information proposal – a couple of Government commissions have recommended that the Flybe scheme should be adopted across aviation.' EuroManx has assured me they are already looking into a labelling scheme of their own.

Through working with the UK's Labour Government Mr Rutter is hoping that Flybe's eco-labelling scheme will also form the basis of assessments for a revised Airport Departure Tax (APD). 'We've had engagement with DEFRA and the Transport Ministry in the UK and are working on [APD] proposals currently with the Treasury.'

The introduction of this eco-labelling scheme seems to be good news for environmentally concerned travellers, especially if it's manifested across the aviation industry as a whole. While ultimately it would be better if people stopped travelling as far and as frequently, it's a good start. But can the market really solve climate change? 'Not on its own, no,' says Mr Rutter. 'Can the market place allow us to balance the need to bring climate change to a level which is acceptable and keep a sustainable economic growth going, yes.'

To ensure an effective worldwide response to global climate change a partnership approach between governments and business will be necessary.

Flybe has shown its willingness to engage with this debate and should be applauded. If other companies step quickly up to the plate, and start innovating within the market place and guiding governments to make the right decisions about legislative constraints and encouragements to slow global warming then it is quite possible that environmental change can be achieved and economic growth maintained.

If not, as the Stern Report explained so starkly just a year ago, we could well see a world recession triggered by global climate change, and the introduction of stringent energy regulations, very soon.

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