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Green groups dismayed as flights soar to record high

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Aviation growth is soaring to an all-time high, raising the prospect of a huge increase in the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming.

For the first time, more than 2.5 million commercial flights will be made around the world in a single month, with 2.51 million scheduled for May, says the flight information company OAG. This beats the previous record of 2.49 million flights last August.

The figure marks year-on-year global growth in flight numbers of 5 per cent, which translates as an extra 114,000 flights and 17.7 million extra passenger seats compared with May last year.

The growth rate, green campaigners said yesterday, would considerably outstrip any improvements the airlines could make in engine fuel efficiency or traffic management to bring down emissions. Aviation is the fastest-growing source of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas, and also the origin of other greenhouse gases including nitrous oxide and water vapour.

The new figures highlight not only the remorseless upward trend in global aviation, now greatly boosted by the cheap flights sector, but also astonishing increases in some individual countries. China's domestic flights as a whole are up by 18 per cent year on year, and international flights to and from the country have risen by 17 per cent.

Flights to and from Russia are up by 16 per cent since this time last year, while flight numbers to and from the two new EU member states, Romania and Bulgaria, are up by 14 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. Flights in and out of Britain are up by 7 per cent over the year - an extra 8,000 trips and an increase of 1.9 million, or 10 per cent, in seat numbers. The increases are even more remarkable in the low-cost sector. Cheap flights to and from Spain are up 68 per cent in a year, with seat numbers up by 77 per cent - an increase of 2.5 million.

OAG's managing director, Duncan Alexander, said: "We are witnessing a step change in the way airlines are differentiating their product. This is great news from a traveller's viewpoint, with much more competition and choice." But green groups took a different view. "The binge-flying culture is taking off worldwide, and the price will be paid by the victims of climate change," said John Sauven, executive director of Greenpeace. "If Gordon Brown becomes prime minister he should tax aviation fuel and call a halt to airport expansion."

According to aviation industry figures to be published next month, obtained by the Aviation Environment Federation (AEF), global CO2 emissions are likely to rise from between 500 to

600m tonnes in 2005 to between 1,200 and nearly 1,500m tonnes in 2025. Britain's total CO2 emissions are less than 600m tonnes.

"The point is, these growth rates just render air travel completely unsustainable," said the AEF's Jeff Gazzard, "And whatever you think about carbon offsetting or emissions trading, the only thing that will really bring them under control is flying less."

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