U.S. and U.K. Tangle Over Airline Emission Limits

Climate Watch Blog

January 26, 2010 BY Mark Schapiro

You may have noticed over the past year that it has become easier to hop a U.S. airline to fly across the Atlantic to Europe -- the result of an "open skies" agreement implemented in 2008. Now those skies are looking pretty turbulent as three of the biggest U.S. carriers -- United, Continental and Delta, along with the U.S. Air Transport Association--are pursuing a lawsuit to block Britain's effort to impose emission limits on the airline industry.

Britain is the first European country to begin executing a plan by the European Union to reduce emissions from aviation. Even though air travel contributes only about 3 percent of Europe's total greenhouse gas emissions, the European Commission reports that the rate has risen 87 percent since 1990 as air travel has become cheaper but has failed to account for the environmental costs.

The UK lawsuit could be the first in a series of transcontinental
carbon footprint -- one signal of the transatlantic tensions to come.

The U.S. airline industry has adamantly opposed establishing emissions limits domestically, and this lawsuit against the UK shows the widening gap between how the U.S. and European industries are approaching carbon emissions reductions.

The UK’s largest airline, British Airways, has said it will be able to voluntarily reduce its emissions to half that of 2005 levels over the next decade; and Virgin’s Chairman, Richard Branson, has said he is willing to pay a carbon tax on his aviation business. He has also steered some $3 billion of company funds into researching non-fossil fuel alternatives and other greenhouse gas reduction measures.

With the EU upping the ante on emissions controls while the U.S. drags its feet in Congress on setting its own emissions targets, the UK lawsuit could be the first in a series of transcontinental legal battles as global industries face up to Europe’s tougher rules on climate policy.

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