

We can all help airlines to be greener

Roger Gardner

The Conservative party announcement, from its party conference in Birmingham, that it wished to scrap plans for a third runway at Heathrow airport shows the level of controversy about the country's future transport needs.

The decision will have been significantly influenced by environmental concerns, principally those of climate impacts but also of noise and local air pollution.

With sustainability at the heart of transport policy, it is necessary to understand the prospects for mitigating the environmental effects of the predicted strong growth in air transport.

The point raised in Birmingham was that fast train services can offer a way out of the problem. Because short-haul flights represent the bulk of air traffic, it is right to ask how far rail can be used to ease pressures.

Yet there is still no alternative for the long-haul flights at the core of the Heathrow business model. Moreover, short-haul flights will continue to be in demand, unless society is willing to lose the "right to fly" or accept much longer journey times.

Before settling down to write this, I conducted a rather unscientific survey around my office on the use of short-haul flights.

Even in these parlous times of higher mortgage rates, and rising prices, colleagues have run up an impressive number of air miles; a flight to Sardinia for one, while another has recently been to Amsterdam; a flight to Dublin and a trip to Rome to check out wedding venues for a third; all this seems to confirm that short-haul (and often low-cost) air travel is seen as a right rather than a luxury.

So what is to be done? Certainly, we should transfer capacity to rail where it is feasible, and environmentally better to do so. But that still leaves many longer journeys for which there is no viable and speedy alternative.

There is also the question of how to balance out society's expectations, economic benefits and environmental impacts.

Assuming these considerations can be reconciled, there seem to be three main ways to deliver cleaner air transport: by changing the price consumers pay, introducing new technologies and removing inefficiencies in the system.

Governments can alter pricing through taxes, charges and emissions trading and, if it is a matter of protecting an annual holiday to the sun, we are likely to swallow higher prices.

Business may also judge that the benefits of a trip outweigh the added cost, although there is an increasing trend towards video conferencing as short-haul flights will continue to be in demand, unless society is willing to lose the alternative to air travel.

However, if economic measures are really to benefit the environment, they need to act as drivers for airlines to lower their environmental impact and to incentivise the industry to introduce cleaner and quieter technologies.

Amazing technological advances have already been delivered and the jet engine is an efficient machine.

But lead times for technologies and the rate they feed into fleets of aircraft are long and slow. This time lag means that, when a significant opportunity comes along, it is essential to capture every ounce of innovation.

Such an opportunity may be in the offing, as Airbus and Boeing contemplate replacements for their A320 and B737 short-haul aircraft families. It is essential that environmentally radical technologies are applied at an early stage, because these designs will lock in a certain level of carbon emissions for several decades and significantly affect aircraft noise and air quality metrics.

Short distance air travel also creates problems of congestion, because many flights compete for airspace and airport capacity in highly populated regions.

Regulators are getting to grips with this issue by aligning airspace blocks but there remains much to be done and the pressures continue to build.

Aside from these big influences, there are other challenges linked to delivery of efficient, short-haul travel, such as enhancing transport links.

But a critical factor is public sensitivity about environmental issues and our willingness to pay. We all have our part to play.

My own consists of working, through Omega, to come up with solid research solutions to help the industry and policy makers develop air transport with minimum environmental impacts.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, October 13 2008, Caderno Especial Global Traveller, p. 3.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais