

Coronavirus Spurs Mass Cancellation of Climate Meetings

The outbreak could also complicate the rollout of an airline emissions trading program

By Nathaniel Gronewold, E&E News on March 13, 2020



An introduction video plays along the walls of the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly at the summit on climate change September 23, 2019 in New York City. Credit: Spencer Platt Getty Images

Several U.N. meetings meant to tackle global warming are being postponed or canceled outright in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The outbreak also threatens to complicate a planned rollout of an airline emissions trading program organized by the U.N. International Civil Aviation Organization. Regional briefings on the trading program are supposed to be held in several locations beginning this month.

The moves mark a significant shift.

The most recent gathering of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change went ahead in Paris without interruption, but IPCC has scuttled its next formal gathering slated for mid-April in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

“We have canceled the Lead Author Meeting of IPCC Working Group III that was due to take place in Quito, Ecuador, 15-19 April 2020 with about 250 people,” said IPCC spokeswoman Melissa Gomis. “We are now making plans for a virtual meeting during the same period and added days that would have been needed for travel.”

IPCC’s secretariat is now reviewing all planned or proposed travel by its staff “on a case by case basis,” Gomis added.

The office of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Bonn, Germany, has canceled all physical meetings through the end of April and is weighing what to do about a series of regional climate negotiations meant to strengthen U.N. member states’ nationally determined contributions toward lowering greenhouse gas emissions.

One such round of talks already has been called off. UNFCCC announced it would hold off hosting the Africa Climate Week slated for Kampala, Uganda, in late April. Officials insist that the meeting “is only postponed and not canceled, and will take place at a later time that has yet to be determined.”

UNFCCC said it made the decision after several governments began implementing mandatory self-quarantine orders for visitors arriving from abroad, especially those arriving from countries hardest hit by the coronavirus outbreak. Uganda’s ministry of health has issued similar guidance.

Left unanswered is the fate of other “climate week” events UNFCCC was looking to hold. A Latin America and Caribbean session is slated for Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in early July.

UNFCCC Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa warned delegates in a letter that the virus emergency is causing serious disruption due to travel restrictions imposed in Germany and elsewhere.

“Some forthcoming meetings require quorum which can be affected by last-minute cancellations or non-attendance by members or alternates,” Espinosa wrote. “Lack of quorum hinders decision-making capacity at the meetings. The secretariat has already experienced this situation in the past few days.”

She added that UNFCCC is considering “suitable alternative arrangements to meetings scheduled during March and April,

such as virtual meetings, or postponement.”

The London-based International Maritime Organization also has postponed a gathering that was scheduled to occur this month. IMO’s Scientific Group and Legal Committee were supposed to meet to discuss a number of issues, including possible greenhouse gas regulations for the global shipping sector.

IMO also insists that the meetings have simply been postponed and not canceled, though they have not been rescheduled. “IMO will continue to monitor all developments related to COVID-19 and will advise as soon as possible on the future postponement of meetings,” officials there said in a notice.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres told reporters this week that the virus outbreak is forcing preventive measures at U.N. headquarters in New York, as well.

“Both the coronavirus and climate change are very serious problems; both require a determined response, a response by governments, institutions like the U.N.,” he said. “It is important that all the attention that needs to be given to fight this disease does not distract us from the need to defeat climate change.”

The coronavirus pandemic also is threatening to hinder the launch of the International Civil Aviation Organization’s Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation, otherwise known as CORSIA.

ICAO has five regional meetings for CORSIA consultations planned for March and April. The agency has not formally delayed or canceled any of them yet but has warned interested participants to plan for interruptions. Registration for the talks end in eight days.

“ICAO is continuously monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on our planned events,” officials there warned on its CORSIA planning website. “As this information is being assessed on a daily basis.”

This week, the ICAO council in Montreal adopted a declaration affirming “the urgent need to reduce the public health risk of the spread of COVID-19 by air transport and protect the health of air travelers and aviation personnel.”

Rayna Wong, a secretary at the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines, said that as far as her organization is aware, the CORSIA rollout and consultations will go forward.

“Implementation of CORSIA is progressing worldwide as planned,” Wong said in an email.

Airlines have taken a steep hit to their businesses as a result of the ongoing emergency.

Air traffic throughout the Asia-Pacific region is down sharply. Desks for Chinese airlines at airports in Osaka, Japan, and Tokyo were left empty as carriers shut down flights due to travel restrictions from China. South Korea and Japan have just implemented new travel restrictions on each other, warning passengers that they will be subject to self-quarantine orders for two weeks regardless of their health status.

The Singapore office of the International Air Transport Association projects the industry as a whole will suffer revenue losses of \$63 billion to \$113 billion from lost passenger revenue depending on the length of the coronavirus crisis.

IATA’s worst-case scenario “is a 19% loss in worldwide passenger revenues,” the association said. “Financially, that would be on a scale equivalent to what the industry experienced in the Global Financial Crisis.”

CORSIA compliance is expected to cost billions of dollars per year, but the industry largely plans to pass the costs on to its customers.

With airline passenger travel down sharply because of the pandemic, the aviation sector’s greenhouse gas emissions have plummeted—which could complicate efforts to calculate emissions reductions goals to be driven by CORSIA. IATA did not respond to requests for comment about how the COVID-19 virus is hitting CORSIA planning.

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