Aviation industry is 'failing dramatically' on climate, insiders say

Professionals call for a fundamental transition including controlling flight numbers

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Carbon emissions from aviation are excluded from the national plans countries submit to the UN's climate body. Photograph: Roger Bamber/Alamy

The aviation industry is "failing dramatically" in its efforts to tackle its role in the climate crisis, according to a newly formed group of aviation professionals.

They say they are torn between their passion for flying and their concern for the planet and are calling for a fundamental transition of the industry, including controlling flight numbers.

The group, Call Aviation to Action, says the industry is overly optimistic about emissions-cutting technology and trapped in a business model that demands ever-growing flight numbers. The lack of significant climate action from the industry risks it being destroyed, the group says, as heavy regulation from outside will become necessary as the climate crisis intensifies.

Karel Bockstael, a co-founder of the group, and a vice-president of sustainability at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines until 2022, said: "We see the good that aviation can do but we also see that we must reinvent our industry to restore its positive contribution to the world."

Due to their international nature, carbon dioxide emissions from aviation are excluded from the national plans that countries submit to the UN's climate body. Instead, the UN's aviation body, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), is tasked with tackling the planet-heating gases.

Bockstael said: "My view is ICAO have been failing dramatically on that responsibility, because the only thing it came up with after eight years of discussion is the Corsia scheme, which is nothing more than carbon offsets for the growth of aviation above a certain threshold, exporting your problem to another industry." The scheme has been criticised as "unambitious and problematic" and has yet to require any airline to use a carbon credit.

He said: "If we do not act, by 2050 aviation emissions will be about a quarter of all human-caused emissions – that will be really a very shameful position.

"We love the magic of flying but we foresee it being destroyed. That's what we want to prevent. We hope our initiative will help a really big group of aviation professionals to speak up, because we think they're the silent majority. We need to break the silence and encourage our industry leaders to become part of this transition."

The Guardian has previously been contacted by numerous aviation professionals concerned about the climate crisis but who felt unable to speak publicly.

Revealed: 'extremely concerning' industry influence over UN aviation body

The group said it had already signed up dozens of professionals before its launch on Tuesday, including engineers and airport and airline executives.

A spokesperson for ICAO said: "ICAO is committed to developing technically robust aviation standards and guidance material that can be implemented worldwide to drive progress towards the net zero carbon emissions goals that governments have set. As a politically neutral standard-setting body, we do not comment on the positions or activities of specific external parties."

Tom Reynolds, an airline pilot and member of Safe Landing, a global group of climate-concerned aviation workers, said: "As a commercial pilot, I'm trained to recognise risks and act, and the climate crisis is one we can't ignore. But I believe we're on the cusp of a new jet age. With bold leadership, investment and the right policies, we can build an aviation industry that celebrates and preserves the beauty of flying for generations to come."

Flying causes more CO2 emissions than any other form of transport per mile and is dominated by rich passengers, with 1% of the world's population responsible for 50% of aviation emissions. The industry's climate plans are rated "critically insufficient" by Climate Action Tracker.

ICAO forecasts a doubling of passenger numbers by 2042, and the industry argues that more efficient aircraft, sustainable fuels and Corsia can control

CO2 emissions. The ICAO has been accused of having been captured by the industry, the Guardian reported in February.

Independent experts say the feasible scale of measures to cut aviation emissions is extremely unlikely to compensate for such a doubling in traffic, with, for example, fuel-efficiency improvements now stalling. The CEO of Qatar Airways called the airline industry's emissions goals a "PR exercise" in 2023.

Bockstael said: "The absolute impact of aviation is still on a pathway up despite all the longer-term aspirations of ICAO [of net zero by 2050]."

The Call Aviation to Action group said the industry should set targets for absolute emissions cuts in line with science-based CO2 budgets and stop "lobbying against climate policies". The industry should also acknowledge that managing global demand for flights in a fair way is part of the solution, it said.

Bockstael said the cost of emissions-cutting technologies would increase the price of flying but that additional measures, such as flight or carbon taxes, could be needed to keep passenger numbers at sustainable levels. Such constraints on demand must be fair, he said, offering equitable access to flying in developing countries and addressing heavy frequent flyers in rich nations.

Finlay Asher, an aerospace engineer and member of Safe Landing, said: "As an engineer, what really excites me is that the Call Aviation to Action proposals would lead to a new golden age of innovation. Our industry is in need of an upgrade: new aircraft designs, new forms of zero-carbon power and new airport layouts to support these. The research, development and operation of this new air transport system will not only create more jobs but also make flying greener, cleaner, quieter and more accessible to society."