

Cancel Private Jets? Here's a Better Idea

Analysis by Chris Bryant | Bloomberg

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The private jet industry's "No Plane, No Gain" campaign emphasizes the productivity and economic benefits of flying private. And judging by the surge in pre-owned jet sales last year and the record number of European private flights this summer, travelers well understand the appeal of avoiding the hellscape of commercial travel.

Yet, whether due to the tone-deaf bragging of Instagram stars or sites tracking billionaire owners such as I Fly Bernard (Arnault), business aviation — its preferred nomenclature so you don't dwell too much on all those flights to Ibiza and Sardinia — is losing the public-relations battle. The problem? Its oversized environmental footprint.

After a summer of drought and punishing heat, green politicians in France are demanding an outright ban on such aircraft, which often fly empty and produce several times more emissions per person and mile traveled than flying commercial.

A ban is unlikely, considering France is the home of Airbus SE and Dassault Aviation SA (manufacturer of Falcon jets); Paris and Nice are also among the busiest European destinations for private jet flights.

Outlawing private jets might also be counterproductive: Many of the technologies needed to decarbonize aviation will appear first in smaller planes before making the leap to larger jets. We should let wealthy fliers fund that innovation.

The French government is considering new taxes and regulations on the industry and plans to consult European partners about the issue in the autumn. And why not?

Penalizing wasteful journeys and promoting lower-carbon aircraft and fuels can help private-jet operators retain their fraying social license. And though the industry has committed to net zero emissions by 2050, fossil-fuel powered private flying should end much sooner than that on shorter routes.

Admittedly, private jets account for just 0.04% of global emissions, but they have huge symbolic importance. Governments can hardly urge the public to pollute less when the wealthy do as they please. Those who try to fly as little as possible — and therefore see friends and family less than they would like — are frustrated when celebrities flit around on jets (and summer on thirsty superyachts) as if the climate emergency was irrelevant.

Telling Instagram followers you purchased carbon offsets won't cut it. In the short term, sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), which can be produced from waste cooking oils, fats or renewable electricity, is the most feasible way for the industry to clean up its act.

Though at least twice as expensive as regular jet fuel, SAF availability is improving thanks to companies like Finland's Neste Oyj. Innovative "book-and-claim" programs allow customers to purchase SAF credits even when the fuel isn't stored at their point of departure. Increasingly, private-aviation customers don't have an excuse for not paying the premium for lower carbon fuel.

The European Union has set targets for SAF adoption and the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act provides tax credits to spur its development. (The blend of SAF to regular kerosene is limited to 50%, but the industry aims to certify planes for 100% SAF)

Electric aircraft are the other big hope to sustain private flying. Though not yet a realistic option for trans-Atlantic journeys, hybrid and electric aircraft like those produced by Israeli-American startup Eviation Aircraft Ltd. should be flying short-hops within a few years.

Hence, where technologically feasible, I think there should be a quicker phaseout date for fossil-powered private flying, similar to the combustion-engine car bans by a variety of governments that should take effect by about 2035.

Until zero-emission journeys are a reality, curbing growth in private flying will be necessary. A cultural shift already looks to be underway – if you can't show off on social media or your jet is tracked everywhere, is it worth paying for? Financial incentives can also motivate more environmentally responsible choices.

Tax deductions for polluting private aircraft like those enacted by former President Donald Trump should be scrapped.

Canada's Select Luxury Items Tax, which comes into force next month and adds 10% to the cost of a private jet, is a blunt countermeasure. Taxes tied to aircraft efficiency are an improvement and again, the car industry can serve as inspiration: French buyers of the most polluting cars must pay a 40,000-euro (\$40,300) surcharge. Why not jets too? (The rate would of course need to be higher.)

Governments should ensure private jet flights are included in emissions-trading systems – currently there are exclusions for small operators in the EU.

Until now, jet fuel has also often gone untouched by tax authorities. From next year, Europe plans to put a fuel levy all business and leisure trips by private jet, however it only applies to intra-European flights and the tax rate is set fairly low.

A levy on private-jet tickets, scaled according to the aircraft weight and route length as proposed by Switzerland in 2020, is also worth thinking about. Journeys where there are readily available low-carbon alternatives such as rail should be penalized most, or banned altogether.

Making private flying more expensive won't change billionaires' behavior much, but the revenue can at least be used to fund decarbonization efforts. Meanwhile less well-off passengers may think twice next time before abandoning commercial. Or as the saying goes, "No plane, no shame."

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