

ASPEN AVIATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE



Photo by Pete McBride

Every day hundreds of planes take off or land at the Aspen Airport, 99% in opposite directions. ASE is known as one of the most dangerous airports in the country.

Runaway climate change is eroding Aspen's economy, ecosystem, and experience. We've lost a month of winter. Less snow, wilder weather, more fires, and more summer weight restrictions are coming.

Aviation causes 7% of global climate change. Oil-fueled airplanes cause 97% of Aspen Airport's analyzed carbon emissions. Fortunately, aviation innovations can decouple flying from climate change better, cheaper, and faster than enabling bigger fossil-fueled planes to fly into Aspen.

First, climate-safe jet fuel

The County's targeted 30+% greenhouse-gas cut can happen on time (2030)—and severalfold more. First, strongly switch now to Sustainable Aviation Fuel. Aspen Airport sells it, but at the Fixed Base Operation's exorbitant private-monopoly prices. The next few months offer the County's only chance for decades, if not forever, to change the FBO monopoly and regain fair-pricing power, better serving the public interest in using our community's public resource. (Our Ad and Essay #3 explained how.)

Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) has begun intense growth. Made now from waste fats, soon mainly from other non-food wastes, it's blended 30/70 with jet fuel here, 50/50 elsewhere, and probably 100/0 by 2030 (as United has tested). Most top airlines, including Aspen's, endorse SAF to save 75–80% of fossil carbon emissions now, rising to 99% later. Revenue-neutral County or state financial innovations could make Aspen a world leader, turning SAF into the preferred pilot choice.

Then climate-safe equipment, buildings, and planes

Electrifying fossil-fueled ground equipment and vehicles has begun. Local examples prove how new terminals and other buildings can cost-effectively and resiliently burn nothing and produce net renewable energy. Superefficient, electric, and hydrogen aircraft due later in this decade can complete the win. If they're late, existing airliners and backups burning SAF can reliably serve ASE for decades.

The Airport Advisory Board's sensible carbon-tracking recommendations need to fill five data gaps and resolve two puzzles. FBO pricing reform that drops fuel prices could boost sales, paradoxically reducing fuel wasted when pilots tanker in cheaper fuel from other airports. And if private planes' emissions were counted per passenger as they are for airline service, they'd be seen as a far bigger part of the climate problem—and of its collaborative solution.

Deeper questions for better answers

Higher climate ambitions are realistic: ten Swedish airports are already net-zero-emission in all but their planes, which are quickly going electric. And our Airport could evolve more smoothly and smartly with a clear conversation about who, if anyone, wants to bring more people into town, why, and where they'll stay. If that's not the goal, let's stop assuming and enabling it. If it is the goal, let's understand exactly how it can deliver the Aspen experience undimmed, for all, for ever.



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***Exploring new solutions
for a safer, cleaner, quieter,
and better Aspen Airport.***