

Damn the volcanoes

European aviation need not suffer from organisational confusion the next time its skyways are choked with ash – assuming regulators and airlines can learn to embrace risk

When the Eyjafjallajökull volcano spewed its ash into Europe's skies in April, airlines claimed that stopping flying completely was unnecessary. The fact that they have been proven right does not mean that next time there is an ash event, flying will continue more or less uninterrupted.

There is a lot of money riding on getting it right next time. Speaking at the Keilir Aviation Academy's conference on Eyjafjallajökull and Aviation last week, Stephen Perkins, head of the OECD's joint transport research centre, put resulting global primary and secondary losses at \$1.1 trillion. So, with an incentive like that to get it right, why would Europe get it wrong again? Influential delegates and speakers at the conference are worried that although European governments, national aviation authorities and air navigation service providers have agreed to work together, when the crunch comes they might not do so. Meanwhile the conference also heard

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that there is a 6% per annum chance of an eruption by Eyjafjallajökull's larger neighbour Katla.

A fundamental reason for Europe's organisational confusion in April was that, although the necessary knowledge and expertise to manage such a situation efficiently exists globally, it was dispersed globally among individual volcanologists, meteorologists, engine and airframe manufacturers and airlines. The kind of knowledge and expertise needed to manage Europe's post-Eyjafjallajökull airspace had not been assembled by the



It would be even less fun next time

International Civil Aviation Organisation, and in Europe itself the expertise existed in pockets that were not connected to the decision-making process. Put simply, an event like this had not been anticipated, in Europe or anywhere else. There has been no precedent in aviation history for atmospheric volcanic ash affecting a large area of such high traffic density.

So although Europe has accepted that the initially adopted no-go ash density levels were far too conservative, and that mistake will not be made again, this crisis has also thrown into sharp relief the fact that even the best of global knowledge on atmospheric ash remains an imprecise science. And although it looks as if the probable legacy of Eyjafjallajökull would be a system where airlines are provided the best available quality of ash data and then left to make the decision as to whether to fly or not – as they have always done with weather conditions – that requires a mindset change among the authorities away from pure risk aversion and towards risk management. ■

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Endlessly fighting yesterday's battle

T rue to all expectations, the World Trade Organisation ruling last week on Europe's claim that Boeing receives "illegal" subsidies was a victory for Europe. And, it was a victory for the USA. As they did in June, when the WTO ruled on the USA complaint against European launch aid for the Airbus A380 programme, both sides claimed a win.

So what next? Boeing – claiming a great victory – wants Europe to stop subsidising Airbus. Europe – claiming a great victory – wants the Americans to come to the negotiating table and resolve this dispute.

Don't hold your breath. Boeing is adamant Airbus must comply with the WTO's demands. The Europeans – claiming victory, after all – seem unlikely to do that.

Sources close to Airbus say the Europeans suspect Boeing may actually believe it can win a lawsuit and crush them. Or, maybe, they just hope to rattle Europe's cage enough to put a few hurdles in the way of the A350 programme, especially given the 787's tardiness.

The Airbus call for negotiations makes sense, however, because both sides must recognise that, unlike just five or six years ago when the suits were first filed, they aren't each other's big problem any more.

Rather than fight each other pointlessly, they'd be well advised to pull together to establish a subsidy regime that accommodates the Chinese, Russians, Canadians and Brazilians. ■

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Is Europe now better able to cope with an ash cloud? Is it time for Airbus and Boeing to stop wrangling? Have your say on flightglobal.com/comment



BRIEFING

RUSSIA REVEALS STRATEGIC BOMBER PLANS

PRODUCTION Moscow has selected Kazan to manufacture a previously undisclosed long-range strike aircraft, Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin has revealed. Kazan will continue to upgrade the Russian air force's current Tupolev Tu-22s and Tu-160s, and then "start assembling a new-generation strategic bomber", RIA Novosti quotes Putin as saying.

TRIP UPS EMBRAER FLEET

LEASING Brazilian regional carrier Trip intends to add three leased Embraer 190s to its fleet in the first half of 2011 and is in discussions with two lessors offering eight-year deals. In the meantime it expects to take three E-175s on lease from GECAS by year-end – bringing its total Embraer fleet to nine E-175s – and to receive two new E-190s from the manufacturer in April and May 2011.

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US AEROSPACE MAKES NON-CORE DISPOSAL

RESTRUCTURING US Aerospace has divested machine tool maker New Century Remanufacturing, which it says was an "unprofitable non-aerospace business unit". The company – which is appealing against its exclusion from the USA's KC-X tanker competition – expects a gain of over \$1 million this quarter as a result of the sale.

CATHAY FIRMS AIRBUS WIDEBODY ORDER

TWIN-AISLES Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific Airways has firmed its order for 30 Airbus A350-900s. The aircraft, to be powered by Rolls-Royce Trent XWB engines, are scheduled for delivery over a three-year period from 2016. Cathay also intends to exercise purchase rights for six Boeing 777-300ERs.

ELBIT TEAMS WITH SAGEM

UAVS Israel's Elbit Systems and Sagem of France have signed a memorandum of agreement to establish a joint venture that will market tactical unmanned aircraft systems to the French armed forces and other selected countries.

BA CALLS FOR EXPORT-CREDIT RULES CHANGE

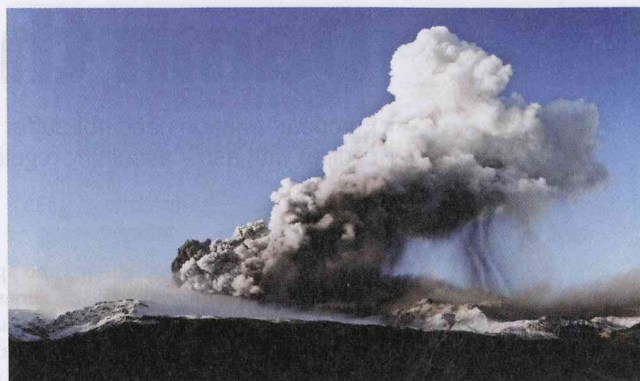
FINANCING Rules restricting access to export-credit guarantees are handicapping British Airways' ability to fund aircraft acquisitions and should be eased, says the carrier's chief executive Willie Walsh. While "home-country rule" prevented airlines from France, Germany, Spain and the UK from using export-credit guarantees to fund purchases from Airbus and Boeing, "these guarantees – and lower borrowing rates – are available to carriers from other countries", says Walsh, who is urging the European Union to "amend the rules".

BOEING PROJECTS MASSIVE DEMAND FOR PILOTS

STAFFING Boeing has forecast that the commercial aviation industry will require 466,650 pilots and 596,500 maintenance personnel over the next 20 years, given the strong demand for new and replacement aircraft anticipated by its current market outlook.

GERMANY'S ACG EXPANDS CAPACITY

FREIGHTERS German cargo carrier ACG has introduced a fourth Boeing 747-400BCF to its fleet. The aircraft – an ex-Martinair and ex-Singapore Airlines jet that has been converted from passenger to freighter configuration – has gone into service on routes to the Asia-Pacific region.



The eruption of Eyjafjallajökull brought Europe to a standstill

AIR TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT DAVID LEARMOUNT KEFLAVIK

Ash cloud disruption avoidable, say experts

Existing knowledge could have saved airlines €1.7 billion

European air transport need not have been immobilised by the Eyjafjallajökull volcanic eruptions in April because the knowledge of how to deal safely with the conditions existed, say leading volcanologists and aviation experts.

Delegates to last week's conference on Eyjafjallajökull and Aviation at the Keilir Aviation Academy in Keflavik, Iceland were told that existing knowledge, properly employed, could have prevented a monetary loss that the European Commission's director of air transport Daniel Calleja-Crespo estimated at €1.7 billion (\$2.2 billion) to the airlines. Stephen Perkins, head of the Organisation for European Cooperation and Development joint transport research centre, put global primary and secondary losses at \$1.1 trillion.

At the time of the eruptions the necessary knowledge and expertise was dispersed all over the world among individual volcanologists, meteorologists, engine and airframe manufacturers, and airlines. It had not been assembled, by the International Civil Aviation Organisation – nor any other organisation – with a view to creating a volcanic ash contingency plan for an eruption such as Eyjafjallajökull's.

Standard guidance has always been to avoid all volcanic ash on the grounds that it was almost always possible to re-route aircraft

around it, under it or over it, but this policy was unable to deal with an incident affecting a large, high-density traffic area such as northern and central Europe. International Air Transport Association director for safety and operations Gunther Matschnigg characterised Europe's April reaction to Eyjafjallajökull as "risk-aversion, not risk management".

The unpreparedness of Europe is not so surprising when Icelandair, the primary aviation inhabitant of this seismically active island, revealed that it began discussing what it would do following a serious ash event only a year before Eyjafjallajökull erupted.

But as a result it was the only airline with contingency plans when the event happened, and operated 85% of its schedules.

Calleja-Crespo said policy options available for future events include maintaining the status quo that immobilised Europe, to improve the quality of information supplied to airlines and to leave the responsibility for go/no-go decisions to them, or re-defining atmospheric ash density risks according to recent experience.

Dr Haraldur Sigurdsson told the conference delegates that while the April was minuscule on a historic scale, even in the past 100 years, much more powerful events were just a matter of time. ■

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