

Air New Zealand pulls the plug on 2030 climate targets

One expert says the airline's climate change target was unrealistic, as Air New Zealand says it will work on a new target.

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File photo. Air New Zealand chief executive Greg Foran. Photo: RNZ / Nate McKinnon

Air New Zealand has pulled the plug on its climate targets saying the resources needed to meet them are unaffordable and unavailable.

In a statement the airline said it was removing its 2030 carbon intensity reduction target and will withdraw from the Science Based Targets initiative.

It said the new aircraft and alternative jet fuels were hard to get and are expensive.

Chief executive Greg Foran said these supply chain issues and expenses could slow the

introduction of newer, more fuel efficient aircraft into the fleet.

He said work had begun to consider a new near-term climate target that would better reflect industry challenges.

Air New Zealand chair Dame Therese Walsh said the airline remained committed to reaching its 2050 net zero carbon emissions target.

"Our work to transition away from fossil fuels continues, as does our advocacy for the global and domestic regulatory and policy settings that will help facilitate Air New Zealand, and the wider aviation system in New Zealand, to do its part to mitigate climate change risks."

Unrealistic and not surprising - experts react

An Air New Zealand plane. Photo: RNZ / Nate McKinnon

Sustainable transport researcher Dr Paul Callister said Air New Zealand's climate target was unrealistic and was never going to be achieved.

He said when the airline set the target it knew its fleet was relatively new and would take time to upgrade, and that sustainable fuel was hard to get.

"We've seen report after report saying that sustainable aviation fuels are not being

produced and the quantities they should be and part of the problem is that airlines are not willing to pay the full cost of it. They're wanting cheap fuels and they're wanting government subsidies to pay for those fuels. It's a bit of a vicious cycle.

"The second thing is that Air New Zealand has been upgrading its fleet over time, so it's a relatively new fleet. So to get those efficiency changes in the time that they talk about, it was never going to happen, the electric planes were never going to arrive in that time frame."

Callister called for national emission reduction regulations for airlines.

"Air New Zealand is the biggest player, domestically at least, so unless you have all the airlines under some sort of regulatory regime where you're actually forcing emission reductions, whatever in New Zealand says, you really won't make a difference.

"The Ministry of Transport suggests that domestic aviation is going to increase quite significantly and international aviation's going to grow at about 3.2 percent per annum right through to 2031. In that report the second emission reduction plan has no assumptions that electric planes are going to arrive by 2030 and has no assumptions that sustainable aviation fuel is going to make a difference.

"Basically what we're looking at is that the industry being given a free hand to keep expanding and keep expanding emissions."

He said it was becoming a pattern in the aviation industry to set bold emissions targets and not meet them.

Professor Sara Walton from the University of Otago's climate change research network said industry leaders in the climate and emissions space were crucial.

"If we do not support a science based decarbonisation transition then we can quickly digress into setting voluntary targets that are meaningless in terms of meeting essential carbon budgets.

"A 2050 net zero commitment is not enough... We need 2030 commitments to help mitigate and stay within the carbon budgets for a 2 degree world. It is incredibly disappointing to see any company move away from such ambition."