

RENEWABLE ENERGY

Landmark U.S. airport microgrid divides climate advocates

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Pittsburgh International Airport is expected to be the first airport powered completely by a microgrid. John Marino/Wikipedia

Pittsburgh International Airport announced its intent this month to build what would be the first airport in the country to be completely powered by its own microgrid.

The microgrid — which would involve nearly 7,800 solar panels and on-site natural gas wells — was prompted in part by major power outages at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

"Part of our microgrid is to make sure that we are doing all we can to be as resilient as we can to keep the lights on and to stay in operation if in fact there is some type of major power outage," said Tom Woodrow, vice president of engineering at the Allegheny County Airport Authority. Cost reduction and resilience were also top priorities for the project, he said.

Although natural gas will initially be a larger percentage of the microgrid's power source, Woodrow noted that there is a potential to increase solar power in the future and reduce the airport's carbon output.

"We are having a reduced carbon footprint by having a much higher efficiency process on our property," Woodrow said.

Other airports across the United States also are implementing renewable energy initiatives to create more reliable power sources and environmentally friendly operations.

Although the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority is not building a microgrid, the aviation campus has plans for greater energy resilience with the installation of a battery energy storage system for its solar arrays at the beginning of next year, for example.

The installment is part of the San Diego airport authority's sustainability management plan, which aims to strategically meet long-term sustainability goals.

"We're not just slapping solar panels onto everything," said Brendan Reed, the airport authority's director of planning and environmental affairs.

Energy efficiency was San Diego International Airport's first priority as it enables San Diego to further reduce its carbon footprint and cut costs, Reed said.

'Flight Free' backlash

The Pittsburgh announcement comes as a "flight shame" movement pushing people to fly less has spread across Europe, dividing climate advocates ([Climatewire](#), Sept. 5).

Katherine Leswing of Flight Free USA said that "just focusing on electricity sources on the ground is not going to actually make a huge impact in the airline industry."

Leswing is the East Coast coordinator for the organization, which is a branch of the "We Stay on the Ground" grassroots campaign that originated in Sweden. The group's goal is to have 100,000 people pledge to give up flying for 365 days.

Since the Flight Free USA chapters were founded in August, Leswing said 211 people have signed the pledge as more people realize how flying greatly contributes to their carbon footprint.

"I calculated what my emissions were for this past year for my flight. I took three small domestic flights round trip and one international flight, and that was about 3.6 tons of carbon," Leswing said. "You can see it's more than a fifth of my carbon output for the year."

The International Council on Clean Transportation reported in September that 2.4% of carbon dioxide emissions came from commercial airline operations between 2018 and 2019. Over the past five years CO2 emissions from that sector increased by 32%.

As debate about air transportation's carbon footprint continues, the Federal Aviation Administration has been taking steps to motivate airports nationwide to implement sustainable practices in the last decade.

The FAA has environmental programs that aid airports in their compliance with federal laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act.

From 2010 to 2016 the FAA had a Sustainable Master Plan Pilot Program that awarded 47 grants to airports across the country in an effort to reduce environmental impacts.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport has received grant funding in the past few years for electric shuttle buses, for instance.

In an emailed statement, the FAA said that under the FAA Modernization and Reform Act, "the agency has provided more than 10 grants in the past 5 years totaling over \$12M for energy efficiency."

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