

France to ban some domestic flights where train available

French MPs have voted to suspend domestic airline flights on routes that can be travelled by direct train in less than two and a half hours, as part of a series of climate and environmental measures. EURACTIV's media partner, The Guardian, reports.

After a heated debate in the Assemblée Nationale at the weekend, the b
watered-down version of a key recommendation from President Emm
Macron's citizens' climate convention, was adopted.

It will mean the end of short internal flights from Orly airport, south of Paris, Nantes and Bordeaux among others, though connecting flights through Charles de Gaulle/Roissy airport, north of the French capital, will continue.

The climate commission set up by Macron had originally recommended scrapping of all flights between French destinations where an alternative train journey of less than four hours existed.

This was reduced to two and a half hours after strong objections from certain regions and from Air France-KLM, which, like other airlines, has been badly hit by local and international COVID-19 restrictions on travel.

A year ago, the French government agreed a €7bn loan for Air France-KLM on condition that certain internal flights were dropped, but the decree will also ban low-cost airlines from operating the banned domestic routes.

The chief executive of Air France-KLM, Benjamin Smith, has said the airline is committed to reducing the number of its French domestic routes by 40% by the end of this year.

The transport minister, Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, told MPs: "We have chosen two and a half hours because four hours risks isolating landlocked territories including the greater Massif Central, which would be iniquitous."

The measure, part of a climate and resilience bill, was passed despite cross-party opposition. The Socialist MP Joël Aviragnet said the measure would have a "disproportionate human cost" and warned of job losses in the airline sector. Other MPs, including from the Green party, complained that watering down the climate convention's recommendation had made the measure meaningless.

Mathilde Panot, of the hard left La France Insoumise, said the measure had "emptied", while her colleague Danièle Obono said retaining the four-hour threshold would have made it possible to halt routes that produce "greenhouse gases".

The French consumer association UFC-Que Choisir had called on MPs to support the four-hour recommendation and give the new law “some substance ... also putting in place safeguards that [French national rail] SNCF will not seize opportunity to artificially inflate its prices or degrade the quality of rail service”.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing environmental and health crises. It must lead us to rethink our health policies in order to face the challenge of future health crises of infectious origin.”

It added that banning domestic flights if a direct train alternative of fewer than four hours existed would have a “real impact” on reducing CO2 emissions and would not adversely affect travel times or prices.

“On average, the plane emits 77 times more CO2 per passenger than the train on these routes, even though the train is cheaper and the time lost is limited to a few minutes,” it said. “Our study shows that ... the government’s choice actually empties the measure of its substance.”

Details of the exact routes that will be halted will be published in the official decree. Flights from Paris to Nice, which takes about six hours by train, and Paris to Toulouse, four hours by train, will continue.

France’s new law will be watched closely by other countries. Austria’s conservative-green government introduced a €30 tax on airline tickets for flights of less than 217 miles (350km) last June and a ban on domestic flights that cannot be travelled in less than three hours by train.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands has been trying since June 2013 to ban short-haul domestic flights. In 2019, Dutch MPs voted to ban flights between Schiphol airport in Amsterdam and Zaventem airport in Brussels, a distance of 93 miles. However, the ban was seen as breaking European commission free-movement regulations and was not implemented.

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