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The industry needs waste management standards.

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BY GREGOIRE JAMES AND EDWARD DAVIDSON

JUST AS SUSTAINABILITY WAS GAINING widespread adoption and buy-in, the aviation industry finds itself knee-deep in even more single-use plastic from the pandemic due to the lack of an integrated plastic supply and collection chain. Yet plastic has no equal as a physical barrier, for it adequately protects travelers and workers from transmitting pathogens and can quell fears and anxieties. So where do we go from here?

If we set aside the pandemic for a moment, could the development of standards advance sustainability in an industry that has historically struggled with basic recycling? Could a sourcing or supply chain strategy built around the circular economy deliver the cost efficiencies the current procurement process seeks?

For sustainability to be practical, it must have economic and environmental benefits, and its metrics must be transparent and measurable. Currently, within the aviation industry, these components are missing for waste.

The aviation industry is no stranger to the implementation of standards. Standards have helped industry professionals focus on their work while leveraging a proficient, safe and secure global network. Where are the standards for waste handling?

Instead of shaping narratives around how products are seemingly sustainable, could the focus be shifted to design and identification using a predetermined shared blueprint across aviation assets and brands? For example, can a plastic fork have an airline's logo while leaving its material composition to be preselected by industry experts, which, after all, is a non-competitive function? Could standards unlock collection and monetization barriers and deliver verifiable and measurable environmental stewardship? Having one type of disposable fork could drive down costs, offer greater sustainability, and create throughput efficiency from collecting a single material type.

Alleviating the industry from regulatory pressures of handling its waste could also be a byproduct of standards because waste composition would be predetermined and known beforehand. Today, however, policymakers mandate costly handling protocols to protect other sectors that depend on a pathogen-free environment because, as of now, we cannot guarantee that aviation waste is devoid of pathogens. Standardizing materials means items could be readily identified and recaptured in a pathogen-free manner, rather than buried forever after only one use.

Why, then, has the industry resisted developing, adopting or executing standards for its disposables? Could these activities help an industry rebuild and even future-proof its supply chains? Can resilience, or our relationship with the rest of the natural world, be built on the procurement of recyclable goods that meet perceived policy constraints and add to bottom-line benefits?

Airlines and airports currently focus on their own internal sustainability initiatives and operate independently of the rest of the supply and collection ecosystem. These silo strategies have had a negative impact when considering local collection infrastructure. After all, the components that make up the international industry must adhere to local waste programs and abide by national regulations.

Through standards, airlines and airports could avoid costly waste management and policy constraints. Standardization of supply and collection chains would provide proper resource management and accelerate the aviation industry's transition to a circular economy.

Unfortunately, by incorrectly assigning zero value to waste, resources are given a one-way ticket to a landfill or an incinerator. Perhaps with the industry in reset mode, we can all pause to collaborate and embed standards to ensure we can all build back better. ATW

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