



Alaska Airlines:

Outsized Influence in Sustainability

The future of sustainability at Alaska Airlines is well-defined, measurable, and inspiring.

By Jennifer Ferrero



Alaska Airlines wants to be an airline that everybody loves. President and CEO Ben Minicucci said, “To live our purpose and create an airline people love, we must operate every day in a way that cares for both people and the environment.” While this may sound impressive for the 90-year-old commercial airline, it meshes with the actions of the company and its leadership. As it turns out, their lofty goals are very much down to earth and seemingly appropriate.

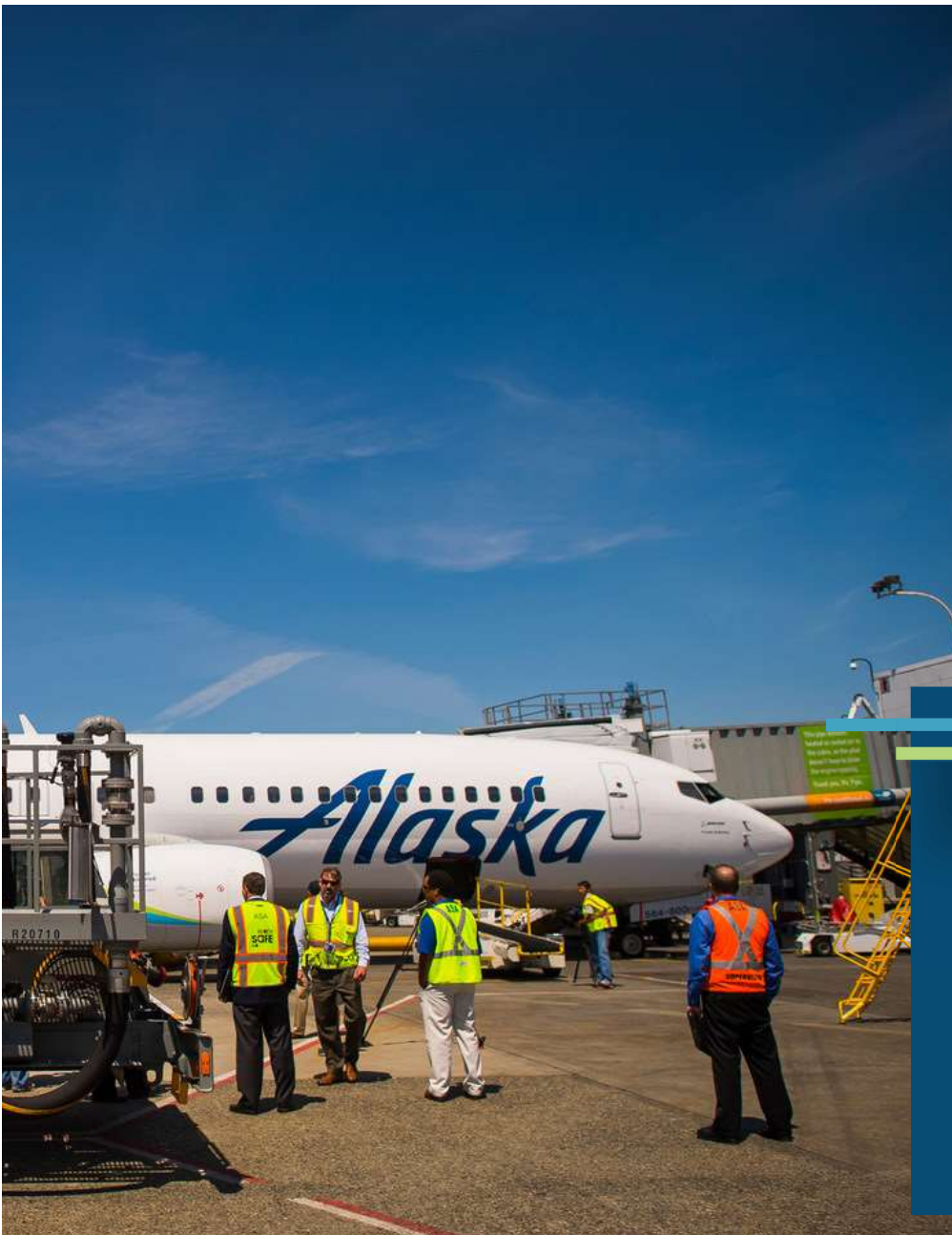
One of those leaders is Pasha Saleh, corporate development director. He has worked as a pilot for a good deal of his career, and now manages Alaska Star Ventures, among other facets of business development focused on sustainability. He is excited for the future of Alaska and said, “We are in a new golden age of aviation with alternative fuels, supersonic flight, and new business opportunities.” He posed the question, “How do we think more strategically to serve our guests for another 90-plus years into the future?”

Senior Vice President, Public Affairs and Sustainability at Alaska Airlines Diana Birkett Rakow plans to achieve both environmental and social sustainability by setting measurable strategic initiatives. They have identified both environmental sustainability through reduction of carbon, reduction of waste, and a reduction (and better use) of water. Social sustainability is reflective of how they run a business that will be better for everyone in the long run. Together, these elements are part of what Birkett Rakow says is “the work to run our company with care, focusing on social and environmental impact. Join us as we take action on initiatives to support our people and our planet.”



Birkett Rakow said, “What’s really important to Alaska, we talk about running our business in a way that is good for all who depend on us.” She noted that stakeholders include employees, guests/passengers, owners, and communities. She said that they want to continue to be strong for all four stakeholder groups. Thoughtfully, she added, “A lot of people talk only of the environmental side. But there is also social sustainability, (fostering a) talented workforce, building communities, other things in addition to the environmental side.”

So, it seems that the term “sustainability” is a loaded word but diving into the meanings of how to accomplish sustainability is in a word ... meaningful.



SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Starting at the beginning, sustainability is reflected in the company values of:

1. Own safety
2. Do the right thing
3. Be kindhearted
4. Deliver performance
5. Be remarkable





The foremost tenet of Alaska Airlines is safety. Birkett Rakow said that immersion into a safe culture begins during employee orientation. She remembers her first day of orientation four and a half years ago, “There is an exercise in orientation where new employees are asked to write down their ‘why’ of safety. Everyone writes down why they want to prioritize safety. ‘I want everyone to get home to their family at the end of the day,’” she said was common, but also includes ideas on passenger and co-worker safety.

With 22,000 employees in the company, safety underscores everything they do. “When we set goals, we take them seriously; we track our performance in order to deliver on them. Safety is our number one value of all of the values at play. Safety is embedded in our values and culture; air travel is incredibly safe,” Birkett Rakow said.

Media Relations Manager, Cailee Olson has been with the company two years. She said that the depth of the values goes back to the company founding 90 years ago in Alaska, “We started as an airline that delivered everything from milk to medicine to remote villages in Alaska; that is the heritage of the company.” She added that during the pandemic, Alaska was flying PPE and vaccines to remote villages again. “That’s the importance of what we do and how we do it; we have a responsibility to communities.”

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

On the corporate website, “We take pride in our efforts to reduce our negative impacts and collaborate in ways that create value for our employees and guests, while strengthening the communities we call home.”

When it comes to the environment, and air travel, there can be many negative impacts. First is the use of fuel, and Alaska Airlines is working diligently to advance the creation of alternative fuels while also optimizing flight paths to reduce fuel use. They are also working to support development of electric or hybrid aircraft that could be viable power sources in the future for a regional fleet.

Saleh, with Alaska Star Ventures, said that they are investing in a variety of companies to create new fuels and environmentally safer methods to fly. While Saleh has been with the company for just over four years, he has been a pilot for 33 years. He said, “I am so proud to work at a place that recognized a future that to others has seemed mythical, or far off. The aviation sustainability movement took off in Europe — we can help shape it here.”

He added, “We have always had an outsized influence to change the industry.” He also noted that Alaska was the first to use GPS to guide aircraft, as well as using the internet to sell commercial airline tickets online.

The most visible form of environmental concern for consumers is the form of waste. Did you know that Alaska Airlines was the first airline to recycle in-cabin waste materials? This concept was created by the flight attendants. Although the program was on pause during the height of COVID, due to safety concerns, it is now back up and running. They also have a goal to replace the top five waste-producing inflight service items with more recyclable or renewable alternatives by 2025. In 2021 they took care of the first two, cutting out plastic water bottles for a boxed water alternative, and using recyclable paper cups instead of plastic for water service.

Regarding carbon emissions, Alaska’s website states, “In April, we shared our commitments to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2040 with a five-part strategy to decarbonize, which includes:

1. Fleet renewal
2. Operational efficiency
3. Sustainable aviation fuel (SAF)
4. Novel propulsion
5. Credible, high-quality carbon offsetting technology

WHAT PASSENGERS/GUESTS CAN DO TO HELP WITH SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

1. Pack lighter – by reducing the weight of your bags by five pounds, you can help reduce Co2 emissions.
2. Bring your own refillable water bottle and fill it up after going through security. This can greatly reduce plastic bottles, paper cups and other resources.
3. Don't print your boarding pass – use the electronic version to reduce waste.
4. Fly the most direct route.
5. Take public transportation to and from the airport.
6. For more information: Relax! You're flying greener, just by choosing Alaska – Alaska Airlines Blog. <https://blog.alaskaair.com/alaska-airlines/relax-and-fly-greener/>

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CREATING LONG TERM VALUE FOR SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

How does Alaska create value for employees and guests? Birkett Rakow said, “In working toward our purpose of ‘creating an airline people love,’ we create value for guests, offering a reasonable, great value fare with a phenomenal experience. Care is at our core; we sometimes say that our employees just care more.”

She shared that there is a spirit with the Alaska Airlines employees that resonates with guests. “I remember flying with my own babies before I came to work at Alaska, and the flight attendants just always made me feel welcome and like we were being taken care of.”

Both Birkett Rakow and Saleh echoed the growth opportunities with the company; there are opportunities to move through different work groups and into management and leadership. They also consider an inclusive environment to be a part of their operations as they continue to expand opportunities.

Investment into new technologies, for less environmental impact, will be better for the airline and guests. In summary, sustainability means a lot of things to people. In the case of Alaska Airlines, it means they are working to lead the industry in both environmental and social sustainability.

WHAT ALASKA IS DOING IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

1. Winglets have been added, increasing fuel efficiency by 3-5 percent
2. The company started test flights with sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) in 2011. Now SAF is a consistently-used drop-in fuel – long past test flights – and Alaska started the first-of-its-kind domestic program with Microsoft using SAF to offset the carbon emissions of flights between SEA and California.
3. Investing in 737-9 MAX jets while retiring outdated Airbus A319s and A320s.
4. Using route optimization software called Flyways to save time, fuel, and emissions.
5. Using efficient procedures such as single engine taxi where appropriate.
6. Reducing the climate impact of non-electric ground-service equipment (GSE) 50 percent by 2025, by using electric GSE at airports where charging infrastructure is available.

For more information: Alaska is investing in emerging technologies to help the planet – Alaska Airlines Blog <https://blog.alaskaair.com/values/fly-greener/asv-launch/>