

'Ryanair is the new coal': airline enters EU's top 10 emitters list

Irish firm joins nine coal plants on list, with carbon emissions up nearly 50% in last five years



Ryanair's chief executive, Michael O'Leary, previously dismissed climate change concerns as 'complete and utter rubbish'. Photograph: Tony Margiocchi/Barcroft Images

Arthur Neslen

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Ryanair has become the first non-coal company to join Europe's top 10 carbon emitters, according to EU figures.

The Irish airline, which transports 130 million people a year, declared 9.9 megatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2018, up 6.9% on last year and 49% over the last five years, according to data in the EU's latest emissions trading system registry.

Andrew Murphy, the aviation manager at the European Federation for Transport and Environment, said: "When it comes to climate, Ryanair is the new coal. This trend will only continue until Europe realises that this undertaxed and under-regulated sector needs to be brought into line, starting with a tax on kerosene and the introduction of mandates that force airlines to switch to zero-emission jet fuel."

Ryanair's chief executive, Michael O'Leary, dismissed climate change concerns as "complete and utter rubbish" in an interview two years ago. His airline is now ranked as Europe's 10th worst emitter, after nine coal plants. Poland's Bełchatów is the worst polluter, producing 38 megatonnes of planet-warming emissions annually.

Coal emissions are falling, though, as Europe's transition to cleaner energy continues. In stark contrast, emissions from airlines, which are exempted from fuel taxes and VAT on tickets, have soared by 26.3% since 2014, outpacing all other transport sectors.

Ryanair did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

EasyJet was Europe's next worst-performing airline, in 31st place on the list, after an 11% rise in emissions in 2018. It was followed by Lufthansa, Norwegian and British Airways, according to analysis of the EU data by the thinktank Sandbag and Transport and Environment.

Aviation is responsible for about 3% of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions, but industry forecasts suggest this could rise by up to 700% by 2050 as the sector grows.

Murphy described aviation as "Europe's biggest climate failure". Europe's airlines pay about €800m (£680m) a year for their rights to pollute. But some studies suggest this sum is eclipsed by the €27bn they would have to stump up if their fuel tax and VAT exemptions were ended.

Despite increased attention from policymakers, the sector receives up to 85% of its EU emissions trading allowances free, with Ryanair consequently saving €96.6m in 2018.

Kevin Anderson, a professor of energy and climate change at the University of Manchester, said: “Ryanair use new and efficient aircraft rammed to the rafters with passengers, illustrating how technology alone cannot reconcile aviation’s rocketing emissions with the Paris climate commitments.

“If we genuinely care for our children’s futures, we need to drive down the demand for aviation. This will require stringent regulations focusing on frequent fliers rather than those taking the occasional trip.”

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