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Improving cabin air in aircraft

Committee debate the Greens' request

On Wednesday 25th January the Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development debated the Greens' motion "to prevent contaminated air in aircraft cabins" (Bundestag printed paper BT-Drs. 17/7480). The recognition from the government that this is a major health risk for aircrew and passengers is still lacking. With this recognition short-term solutions could be implemented.

Evidence of contaminated cabin air incidents in aircraft has recently been increasing. In the worst cases incidents can lead to neurological illnesses. The reason, amongst other things, is the way aircraft are engineered. "Fresh air" for the cabin (known as "bleed air") is drawn from the engines. In parliament, Mark Tressel, tourism spokesman for the Greens said, "Alone logical analysis says that this system can not function without problems". At the hearing on 21st September 2011 the coalition also correctly came to this conclusion. Despite this, nothing has yet been done. The industry is being evasive, airlines are playing down the issue and the government is hopelessly out of its depth and is heavily influenced by lobby. It is hiding behind the contention that it's just a bad smell and that there is no health hazard. Numerous studies and diagnoses tell a different story. Tressel recently obtained test results which found a multitude of harmful substances in the cabin air.

Tressel continued, "It's time for action and we are demanding, amongst other things, that the government actively contributes on an international level and tries to find solutions to the problem; for example with independent investigations by the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment". In addition, the use of TCP-free engine oils must be facilitated and the installation of measuring and control systems for hazardous substances driven forward. The Air Accident Investigation Branch needs to extend their authority (including financially). Funding would come from the Civil Aviation Authority making cuts, and increasing revenue by imposing fines against violations of applicable regulations (non-reporting of incidents, and failure to provide appropriate information and support services). Tressel concluded, "In the long term the only solution is for aircraft manufacturers to move away from bleed air technology. A good example is the "ram air" system on the Boeing Dreamliner (787), in which the air no longer comes from the engines."

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