Achieving carbon neutrality at a European hub – Interview with the CEO of Brussels Airport

Brussels Airport is Belgium’s largest airport and the country’s second most important engine of economic growth. It welcomed an all-time record 25.7 million passengers and carried 732,000 tonnes of cargo in 2018. Brussels Airport also celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2018 – more than 610 million people have travelled to, from, or through the airport since 1958.

Deborah Ng, Ontario Teachers’ Head of Responsible Investing, asked Brussels Airport’s Chief Executive Officer, Arnaud Feist, to talk about the airport’s approach to carbon neutrality.

Deborah Ng: Brussels Airport made the decision to go carbon neutral, one of only a few major airports in the world to do so. What was the impetus for making this decision?

Arnaud Feist: Sustainability is one of our most important values, and a concern for the environment is a key feature of our strategic vision for the future. We’re aware of our impact on the local surroundings, the environment and the climate, and are working to reduce it. We’ve developed and are implementing a sustainable development strategy to increase our positive societal impact and to obtain wide support to grow in a balanced way. One of our primary goals is to reduce carbon emissions, and we have been working toward neutrality since 2009.

We reached a major milestone in June when we received a carbon neutrality certificate from the Airport Council International (ACI).

DN: What exactly does carbon neutrality mean?

AF: For us, carbon neutrality means working toward permanently reducing the airport’s emissions and offsetting residual emissions.

Under the ACI’s Airport Carbon Accreditation program, carbon neutrality is its highest level of accreditation. It means an airport has:

- mapped and verified its carbon footprint through an independent external audit;
- set and achieved targets for emissions reduction;
- worked with partners and third parties at and around the airport to manage and reduce emissions;
- offset all residual emissions from the airport’s activities.
DN: How do you work toward carbon neutrality?

AF: We achieved our carbon neutrality status thanks to investments in energy efficient and renewable energy projects, the purchase of exclusively green electricity and a carbon offset project. We also collaborate with our external partners to reduce carbon emissions that are beyond our control. For example, the implementation of the Single European Sky initiative requires that each airport operate according to the principle of Collaborative Environmental Management. In quarterly bilateral meetings between skies (the authority of airways that ensures the safety and efficiency of air traffic in Belgium) and Brussels Airport, we learn about the challenges and constraints each of us is facing, decide on realistic and sustainable actions to improve environmental performance, work out joint proposals and set common priorities.

DN: What’s next on your sustainability journey?

AF: We will continue working towards consistently reducing our carbon footprint and we’ve set a target of emitting 40% less carbon by 2030 than we did in 2010. We also look into reducing our overall ecological footprint by managing water, noise, mobility, waste and other aspects of our operations. We’re working on that in several ways:

• Promoting the use of public transport by increasing public transit frequency and providing improved access for bicycles to help reduce congestion around the airport.
• Incentivizing airlines to reduce emissions and noise. Airline companies pay for the use of the runways at Brussels Airport. The amount depends, among other things, on the noise performance of the aircraft, which provides a financial incentive for airlines to acquire ever quieter and fuel-efficient aircraft.
• Greening our vehicle fleet by embracing compressed natural gas fuel, plug-in hybrid and full electric technologies for our company cars and utility vehicles, and taking delivery of 40 electric buses for the airside transport of our passengers in early 2019.
• Assessing every new construction or renovation project to determine how we can make it more energy efficient. For example, Connector, the building that links the terminal to the piers, uses thermal energy storage, which means less energy is required to heat and cool the building. Heating and cooling is derived from circulating groundwater between 10 wells.

It’s a conscious, ongoing approach – one that helps us achieve our most important environmental targets and continually reduce our carbon emissions, energy and water consumption and waste produced.

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ARNAUD FEIST
Chief Executive Officer, Brussels Airport