

Moratoria on new airport infrastructure, and scaling down of airports

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“Ultimately, an uncomfortable and familiar conclusion for aviation remains: a moratorium on airport expansion at least in wealthy nations is one of the few options available to dampen growth rates within a timeframe befitting of the 2 °C target.”¹ Alice Bows-Larkin, 2014.

1. Short summary of strategy/measure

The rapid growth of aviation demands new infrastructure. Simultaneously, new or bigger airports demand growth in flights. 550 new airports or runways are planned or being built around the world, plus runway expansions, new terminals etc, in all more than 1200 infrastructure projects. Most of them involve land grabbing, the destruction of ecosystems and local pollution (noise/traffic/particles/etc.). The Environmental Justice Team together with Stay Grounded and the Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement have made a map showing more than 40 conflicts related to airport infrastructure: <https://stay-grounded.org/map/> and <http://ejatlas.org/>

Effective resistance against airport projects can prevent those negative effects, and counter a lock-in to an emissions-intensive, destructive form of mobility for decades into the future. It also makes abstract issues such as emissions become tangible. With activist networks that connect different local struggles, by sharing experiences and joining forces, we can build up pressure to tackle the root causes of aviation growth and climate change.

By definition, a moratorium is an officially-ordered delay or suspension of an activity or a law. In a legal context, it may refer to the temporary suspension of a law to allow a legal challenge to be carried out. In our case, an “airport moratorium” is a building moratorium that halts the construction of a project or projects. Building moratoriums are imposed by cities, towns and the courts, and for a variety of reasons. In addition, a moratorium can be short-term or indefinite, depending on the project and the area where it is located.²

A moratorium on expanding an airport doesn’t lead directly to a systemic change. However, many such demands, especially if made in the Global North, could call into question the stability of the current system.

2. State of the art: Does this measure already exist somewhere?

As far as we know, there is no country yet that introduced the measure on a national scale, prohibiting the construction of any airports and airport infrastructure projects at all. We only found that there are judicial processes for establishing a moratorium against special airports on a regional scale.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14693062.2014.965125?scroll=top&needAccess=true&>

² <https://www.bankrate.com/glossary/b/building-moratorium/>

- **Munich Airport:** In 2012, in a referendum most of Munich's population voted against the construction of the new runway at the city airport. The Bavarian government established a five-year moratorium in 2018. The expansion would mean an increase from 90 to 120 departures and landings per hour. During its campaign in the latest Bavarian regional election, the new government promised to stop any airport expansion, and once in power it agreed the limited-time moratorium. The project is only suspended, still retaining its prior approval. Whether the moratorium will have a long-term effect or not is still uncertain.³
- **Vienna Airport:** in March 2017 an Austrian administrative court blocked the construction of a third runway at Vienna's Airport because it would go against the country's commitments with the Paris agreement.⁴ The court decision considered climate protection more important than any interest in jobs or better aviation infrastructure.⁵ The airport company appealed the ruling saying it would violate essential rights such as freedom of ownership, freedom to carry on a business and the principle of equality. Shortly after, the decision was remanded to the lower court, and after further proceedings it announced approval for the construction of the new runway⁶
- **Idaho Falls:** there was a moratorium of development of land surrounding the Idaho Falls Regional Airport but only for six months.⁷
- **Mexico city:** the project of a new airport in Mexico city in the dry lake bed of Texcoco was launched at the beginning of this century but has been cancelled twice because of local and national opposition and might be cancelled for a third time.
- **Other cases of successful moratoria:** We want to be inspired by previous successful or half successful moratoria such as the atomic moratorium in Germany⁸, the coal moratorium in the US⁹ and the international whaling moratorium.¹⁰ (Information on this point will be distributed in a separate sheet prior to the workshop). Any other example is very welcome.

3. Advantages of the approach to fight for (national) (or EU) airport moratoria and limiting the number of airports

- The introduction of this measure would signal the precariousness of long-standing transport policy. This public visibility could be a turning point where aviation gets labeled "a climate killer".
- When airports expansion is not possible, airlines or nations will need to cap their flights.
- A moratorium will be a relief for people and communities threatened by any airport expansion and the noise and pollution involved

³<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/freising/interview-zu-moratorium-nur-den-status-quo-beschlossen-1.4206040>

⁴<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-viennaairport-runway/vienna-airport-appeals-against-ban-on-expansion-idUSKBN16U0T4>

⁵ <https://www.global2000.at/dritte-startbahn-flughafen-wien>

⁶ <https://www.klimareporter.de/protest/massenprotest-gegen-flughafenausbau>

⁷<https://www.localnews8.com/news/development-moratorium-around-airport-could-be-lifted-soon/1076465891>

⁸<https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/nuclear-moratorium-a-campaign-tactic-merkel-cabinet-colleague-spills-the-atomic-beans-a-752943.html>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/19/climate/court-trump-coal-mining-setback.html>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Convention_for_the_Regulation_of_Whaling

- If this measure is implemented EU-wide, the aspiration of expansion and competition among European airports might disappear.
- Most regional airports write red numbers and are highly subsidized, so there are also economic reasons for reducing the amount of smaller airports.
- We should expect lower opposition for this measure than for other measures, from the point of view of the passengers.
- The measure is socially just in a way that it does not create new social injustice. On the other hand it also doesn't change anything about the unjust access to mobility that already exists.
- A moratorium must include all types of airport infrastructure projects (Aerotropolis, Special Economic Zones, deportation custody)

4. Disadvantages of a national (or EU) airport moratorium

- One could argue: an Airport Moratorium alone is not enough. The number of departures and landings at the existing airports must be dramatically decreased. So the measure does not degrow aviation, and allows the existing level of air traffic.
- The demand for a worldwide moratorium on airports doesn't take into account the differences of the status quo in the countries and therefore might be considered unjust.
- Airport moratoria might be hard to accomplish on a single airport scale because of the existing competition between different airports.
- Stopping growth of airports or even reducing airports will face opposition by workers and trade unions, if there are no good alternative plans
- While we are advocating for an airport moratorium we must already think about demolition of airports.
- It is necessary to make the bans permanent.

5 Questions to discuss

It would be interesting to discuss the following questions in our working group (more questions can be added):

- How can we demolish the assumption, that airport growth leads to more jobs and wealth in the region?
- How can we avoid that such a decision becomes a sacrificial tradeoff against other potential rulings, such as a night flight ban?
- How can we avoid getting only a tenuous moratoria that could be canceled in the next legislation period?
- How do we combine demands for moratoria with demands for scaling down existing airports.

6 Literature

- Alice Bows-Larkin (2015) All adrift: aviation, shipping, and climate change policy, Climate Policy, 15:6, 681-702, DOI: [10.1080/14693062.2014.965125](https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2014.965125)
- Rose Bridger (2015): What is an Aerotropolis, and Why Must These Developments Be Stopped? <https://antiaero.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/gaam-whats-an-aerotropolis2.pdf>