



Thames Estuary airport RSPB Position Statement

Background

The RSPB is wholly opposed to the construction of an airport anywhere in the Thames Estuary because of the immense damage it would cause to the area's internationally important wildlife and the wider environment.

The idea was exhaustively investigated in the previous Government's Aviation White Paper (2003). All the key players, including the aviation industry, contributed, and the idea of an airport in the Thames Estuary was ruled out. In addition to the unprecedented environmental damage and the resulting legal implications, the investigation found that an estuary airport did not make economic sense, would not meet the requirements of the aviation industry and presented a significantly higher (12 times greater) risk of 'bird strike' than at any other major airport in the UK.

A new Thames Estuary Airport hub could also have a very high carbon cost. The RSPB is not against flying but advocates a moratorium on expansion until it can be demonstrated that significant increases in aviation emissions can be accommodated within a UK cut of 80% in emissions by 2050, as enshrined in law by the Climate Change Act (2008). Without this, the scale of the cuts required in the rest of the UK economy to offset a continuing rise in aviation emissions would be potentially crippling. Instead, demand for flights should be managed and aviation industry subsidies withdrawn.

A Thames Estuary Airport would be hugely expensive, cause massive environmental damage, and risk of

birdstrike would be significantly higher than elsewhere in the UK.

Key issues:

1. Damage to wildlife sites

An airport sited in the Thames Estuary would damage or destroy huge areas of legally protected habitat.

Any lost or damaged habitat would have to be recreated elsewhere *before* work on the airport could start – and even then only if it could be proven that there is no alternative site for the expansion and that expansion is the overriding public interest. This would mean a long and protracted legal battle because:

- The Thames estuary contains internationally protected wildlife habitat which has the highest possible legal protection – known as **Special Protection Areas** - in Europe. These protected areas stretch all down the estuary from Gravesend to Southend and Sheerness.
- Every year, the wider estuarine complex is a hub for 300,000 migrant birds that rely on the area for feeding and roosting.
- Any damage must be compensated for and there is nowhere in the Estuary or arguably in Europe where such large-scale damage could be compensated for adequately.

2. Wider environmental impacts

Climate change remains the greatest threat to biodiversity and the RSPB believes that there should be no further airport expansion.



The construction of a massive new airport in the Thames Estuary will have impacts that extend far outside the immediate area. Emissions from aircraft are one of the fastest increasing sources of greenhouse gases. Unchecked, climate change could lead to up to a third of land-based species 'committed to extinction' by regional climate change effects by 2050. The impacts of climate change on wildlife in the UK and abroad are already being felt. Emissions need to be slashed across all sectors if the 80% target is to be achieved, but emissions from aviation are rising rapidly - doubling between 1990 and 2000. While the RSPB is not against flying, further airport expansion should be prevented until it can be demonstrated that significant increases in emissions from air-travel can be accommodated within a UK cut of 80% in emissions by 2050.

- The demand for flights should be managed by encouraging the use of lower carbon modes of transport and removing the substantial subsidies that the industry currently enjoys including tax-free fuel, and the absence of VAT on all aspects of aviation.
- In a low-lying area like the Thames Estuary, the threat of climate change is particularly significant and it is foolhardy to consider building an airport that would only contribute to the underlying problem.
- Successive governments have stressed the importance of sustainable development, particularly in the Thames Estuary. The recent announcement of the Greater Thames Marshes Nature Improvement Area suggests that the estuary is still seen as very

important in environmental terms. Such importance would be disastrously undermined if the airport became a reality.

3. Birdstrike

An airport in the Thames Estuary would be unsafe.

- Even with an aggressive bird hazard management programme (i.e. shooting or scaring the birds away), the bird strike hazard would be up to 12 times higher than at any other major UK airport.

4. The UK economy needs extra capacity?

The claims that without extra capacity in the South East the UK economy will lose many billions of business is not backed up by watertight evidence and must be challenged. Having a UK hub may shorten flight times but not having one is unlikely to undermine business. Whether a new hub exists or not, as profit making businesses, airlines will provide flights to the profitable destinations rather than attempt to open up and operate more, less profitable routes "in the national interest".

A Heathrow hub is only likely to benefit the south east while the hub concept is itself brought into question by the potential trend towards point-to-point services that smaller, long-haul aircraft will allow. Any new hub will be massively expensive and already respected sources are questioning the viability of any such project.

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Further information

If you would like more information about the RSPB's views on the proposal for an airport in the Thames Estuary, and how you can help protect

wildlife in the Thames Estuary, please contact Paul Outhwaite on 01273 775333 or go to www.rspb.org.uk/noestuaryairport