

The Netherlands squeezes Schiphol by cutting thousands of flights

The Dutch government is cutting flights to lessen noise pollution, but airlines and analysts warn of negative impacts.



Although Schiphol is the first to cut flights this way, other governments may choose to follow the Dutch lead | Koen van Weel/ANP/AFP via Getty Images

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Dutch authorities on Thursday confirmed they will slash the number of flights at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport in a bid to cut noise pollution — a step that has airlines suing and calling for Washington to retaliate.

Europe's fifth-largest airport will allow about 9,100 fewer flights on next summer's schedule, eventually hoping to cut movements to about 452,500 a year.

The cuts are part of a broader effort to cut noise from the airport in the densely populated country, adding to a [plan](#) to ban take-offs and landings late at night, reduce access for private aircraft, and bar noisy airplane models.

The airport said this summer that measures already in place have cut the negative impact of flights, with [fewer public complaints](#).

But airlines and analysts warn the cuts could rock the Dutch economy and cost Schiphol business.

“What is going on in the Netherlands for us is absolutely incomprehensible,” Air France-KLM CEO Ben Smith said last week.

“We can’t understand why the Dutch government wants to partially demolish its crown jewel of Schiphol and KLM,” Smith said in a briefing call. “The contraction is a great gift to our competitors such as Lufthansa and British Airways. Emissions don’t decrease, but spread to other countries.”

The Dutch slot coordinator, Airport Coordination Netherlands, confirmed to POLITICO that KLM, the biggest carrier operating out of Amsterdam, will lose around 5,500 annual slots at the airport, or just over 60 percent of the total slots lost.

KLM said in an emailed statement that it was “disappointed” by the announcement. Together with other carriers, KLM is suing over the measure, saying “the procedure followed does not comply with laws and regulations.”

John Strickland, a director with aviation specialists JLS Consulting, called the decision “disastrous” for KLM, other airlines and the Dutch economy.

“Some [flights] may be picked up by other airports which do not face such limitations and this could include passengers making connections at non European airports,” he said in an emailed statement. “Handicapping the vast economic and social benefits which aviation brings, particularly for a trade dependent country like the Netherlands is not the right solution.”

Angry Americans

While KLM will be hurt, U.S. carrier JetBlue faces the loss of all its summer Schiphol slots. The airline only started offering flights out of the Dutch hub in August and as a result has no “historic” right to operate there next summer.

It’s one of 24 carriers that hold no historic rights, according to Hugo Thomassen, managing director of Airport Coordination Netherlands.

JetBlue is pressing the U.S. authorities to retaliate, calling for Washington to block KLM from operating out of New York’s JFK airport.

“We believe the U.S. and Dutch Governments have an obligation under our historic Open Skies Agreement to ensure that JetBlue is granted continued access at Amsterdam’s only viable airport,” the airline said in an emailed statement.

Limiting flights could also shift traffic to other airports, Smith warned, with Copenhagen and Stockholm potentially benefiting. Last month, Air France-KLM took a 20 percent stake in Scandinavian carrier SAS.

Although Schiphol is the first to cut flights this way, other governments may choose to follow the Dutch lead.

Last year, the Belgian federal government paid €25 million in penalties for noise pollution caused by air traffic around Zaventem airport in Brussels.

Over the summer, Belgium's Mobility Minister Georges Gilkinet proposed a ban on flights between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., saying "everyone has the right to rest and quiet nights."

A local council in Lisbon also wants to tackle the impact of noisy planes on local residents, while noise complaints against Dublin Airport have increased five-fold in the last year.