Single European Sky: organisation and use of the airspace

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Two and a half years after the agreement on the adoption of the single European sky legislation, the European Commission is assessing progress made toward the establishment of functional airspace blocks. Given that functional airspace blocks are a key element to the success of the Single European Sky, this mid-report prepared by the Commission sets out the objectives of the functional airspace blocks and gives indications on results that are expect by 2008 and beyond. It also seeks to clarify the roles of the different stakeholders in view of the need to amend the current legislative framework.

The Commission reconfirms that fragmentation of the European airspace into 27 national air traffic control systems hampers a safe and cost efficient service provision. Regular reports from the Performance Review Commission, international comparisons and independent studies demonstrate the high costs associated with fragmentation. Output of air traffic management in the Community could improve significantly if it could increase its scale of operations, like any other industry. As a result the Community' s approach is to seek greater portions of airspace being operated as one single entity. Functional airspace blocks are the tool to reduce airspace fragmentation in order to enhance current safety standards and overall efficiency, to optimise the steadily growing capacity requirements of all airspace users and to minimise delays by managing the traffic more dynamically. These objectives can only be achieved through an increase in the scope of operations – regardless of national borders.

Under the "bottom-up" approach, as embodied in the Airspace Regulation, Member States bear responsibility for tackling fragmentation at its roots. Functional airspace blocks are the means to transform the patchwork of fragmented systems into regional blocs. An increase in the scale of operations is the only way to boost performance. Yet, Member States still need to demonstrate real progress in defragmentation.

The Commission notes that nearly all Member States have started initiatives that seek to establish functional airspace blocks. Nevertheless, big discrepancies in the intensity of efforts exist between the Member States and their air navigation service providers. Although preliminary studies highlight the benefits to users of defragmentation, in terms of an improved quality of service, first estimates of effective cost reductions appear to be marginal, indicating that current Member State ambition is limited.

The report, therefore, calls on the Member States to increase their efforts. The Commission will evaluate, in 2008, the efficiency of the bottom-up approach and assess the possible need to amend the current legislative framework in order to achieve more concrete results.