

SAA's biofuel project takes off with first flights

State-owned airlines SAA and Mango flew their first commercial flights on Boeing 737-800s using blended biojet fuel, the culmination of a three-year trial of a nicotine-free tobacco crop, solaris.



Project Solaris is a partnership between SAA, Boeing, industrial research company Sunchem, sustainable fuels specialists SkyNRG and the Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials.

The crop is grown on 60ha near Marble Hall in Limpopo, but the ultimate objective is to expand growing through southern Africa and build up to sufficient volumes to justify building a refinery.

Until then, the oil extracted from solaris seeds is being exported to AltAir Fuels in the US, where it is refined and sent back to South Africa as blended biojet fuel.

SAA acting chief executive Musa Zwane said the target was for half of the airline's aircraft to use biojet fuel by 2023. SAA's environmental specialist, Ian Cruickshank, said about 97% of the airline's carbon emissions resulted from flying and only 3% from operations, so it had no alternative but to invest in more environmentally friendly fuel.

Project Solaris is targeting 20-million litres of biojet fuel by the end of next year and 500-million litres by 2023, which is half the annual fuel requirement of SAA's Johannesburg hub.

Cruickshank said the benefits of Project Solaris went beyond reducing SAA's carbon emissions.

It would also give the airline greater control over the supply and pricing of its jet fuel, as the supply chain would be rand-based and not dollar-based.

The project would later create thousands of local jobs in agriculture and downstream industries.

The first batch of biojet fuel was produced on a small scale, so it was more expensive than conventional jet fuel. As volumes grew, the cost would become more competitive, Cruickshank said.

Boeing International's director for sustainable aviation fuels, Darrin Morgan, said that in the US biojet fuel was at cost parity with conventional jet fuels and new processing technology was expected to bring costs down further.

Boeing International managing director for Africa Miguel Santos said the aircraft industry was focusing on reducing noise, improving fuel efficiency and lowering emissions.

Source: Herald

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