Brussels must go back to drawing board: FABEC

Air traffic control agencies managing some of the busiest and most complex airspace in Europe are demanding that Brussels rethinks the basis on which its Single European Sky vision is anchored.

They are claiming that the drop in traffic levels was never foreseen when targets were set in 2005 by the European Commission which reckoned that traffic would increase by 50 per cent by 2020.

The states which have lodged the complaint include Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland which together manage 1.7 million sq km of European airspace and handle 5.5 million flights per year – around half of the traffic travelling across Europe.

"As these assumptions are no longer valid, the targets have become unrealistic. Based on the experience of falling traffic figures over the past few years, it is not possible to make extrapolations to 2035 as has been done by the latest published forecast which once again anticipates an increase in traffic volume of 50 per cent," said the six nations which form a grouping called FABEC.

These 'FABEC states' point out that service levels throughout their airspace are high and that air traffic is safe, punctual with high levels of direct routeing.

"That is why we must concentrate on maintaining this level of performance and not destabilise the whole system by imposing overambitious performance targets – especially in the area of cost efficiency," said FABEC.

They propose a two-fold strategy that both addresses growth and stagnation/saturation issues as well as the settting of new, realistic targets which reflect recent developments.

"The old targets set in 2004 should no longer function as the yardstick and ought to be revised in its entirety immediately," said FABEC which adds that, due to a wide variation in traffic growth – flights in the core European region are virtually stagnating while in other countries such as the Baltic States or Turkey, air traffic is booming.

FABEC points out that although the business models of the air navigation service providers vary greatly, they are still subject to the same regulatory objectives set out by Brussels. Yet this does not take into account, or only inadequately, regional and local differences such as pension schemes, VAT and specific airport requirements.

Targets and corresponding measures should therefore be developed at regional and not European level to take those differences into account.

The FABEC states add that deficiencies and immaturities in the existing regulatory framework have seriously destabilised their financial stability.

So far, they claim, during the first reference period which runs between 2012 until 2014, revenues have fallen €226 million throughout the FABEC region – something that was never factored in. Looking forward, initial calculations for the period between 2015 and 2019 predict a shortfall in revenue of up to €0.5 billion across FABEC.

“As a consequence, necessary projects have to be postponed due to a lack of funds,” said FABEC. “Additionally, shifts in traffic flows to improve the European network impose an unacceptable financial burden on individual air navigation service providers.”

The states insist they now need a robust, independent economic regulation not only based on traffic forecasts, but also taking into account cost evolution and controllability.

“This economic regulation has to have the flexibility to react to volatilities in the short term without endangering the long-term stability of infrastructure,” said FABEC. “In addition, a model is needed that lays out how shifts in financial flows can be adequately compensated for and how negative effects which impact individual providers due to measures that benefit the network can be adjusted.”

FABEC air navigation service providers include ANA (Luxembourg), Belgocontrol (Belgium), DFS (Germany), DSNA (France), LVNL (Netherlands), MUAC (EUROCONTROL), and skyguide (Switzerland).