Comparative Analysis of Southern California's Airports And Their Approach to Sustainability

Devin Rubia | Spring 2025 | Professor So-Ra Baek

Cal Poly Pomona | College of Environmental Design
URBAN AND REGIONAL PLANNING

Introduction:

- Airports in the region face growing pressure to expand and modernize facilities and keep up with the increasing travel demand annually.
- This study will assess and compare the sustainability approaches of eight major airports located Southern California.

The goal is to identify the most effective strategies for:

- Balancing environmental sustainability
- Minimizing community and public health impact
- Enhancing operational efficiency

Methodology:

An analysis of the current systems and past financed projects will assess the effectiveness of the implemented strategies and attempt to provide recommendations based on the data researched.

Literature Review and Evaluation Criteria:

- Economic vs. Sustainable Incentives
- Technology Adoption
- Market Competition and Strategic Growth
- Public-Private Collaborations (PPCs)
- Policy and Regulation Impacts

List of Airports Researched:

- Ontario International (ONT)
- San Diego International (SAN)
- Los Angeles International (LAX)
- Palm Springs International (PSP)
- San Bernardino International (SBD)
- Long Beach Airport (LGB)
- Hollywood Burbank Airport (BUR)
- John Wayne Airport (SNA)

Key Findings:

Los Angeles International (LAX)	Major global hub with net-zero goals, smart terminal tech, expansion projects, and strict CEQA/state oversight
San Diego International (SAN)	Space-limited but sustainable with solar and water recycling, smart systems, and strong local regulatory pressure
Ontario International (ONT)	Flexible, cost-effective cargo/passenger hub with clean tech, major growth potential, and minimal regulatory hurdles.
Palm Springs International (PSP)	Tourism-focused with solar/EV initiatives, smart signage, growing domestic routes, and supportive local planning.
San Bernardino International Airport (SBD)	Cargo-focused airport with EV infrastructure and smart systems, expanding services under light regulation.
John Wayne Airport (SNA)	High-income, slot-controlled airport with LEED upgrades, biometric screening, capacity limits, and strict curfews.
Long Beach Airport (LGB)	Small-scale, sustainability-minded airport focused on quiet growth, EV adoption, and strict local growth caps.
Hollywood Burbank Airport (BUR)	Regionally convenient, tech-modernized airport with long-term sustainability goals and high regulatory scrutiny.

Research Area:

Source: (Malik, 2022)

Recommendations:

1. Ground Transporation and Accessibility
   - Prioritize funding and partnerships for rail extensions; Leverage state infrastructure initiatives and federal programs like the FAA's Airport Improvement Program (AIP).
2. Terminal and Infrastructure Modernization
   - Adopt sustainable construction principles and mandate the use of low-carbon concrete, recycled steel, and passive energy design in terminal construction; LEED Certifications of Gold or Platinum should be the baseline for all future constructions and renovations.
3. Community Engagement and Noise Management
   - Enforce and expand sound reduction programs for nearby environmental justice (EJ) communities; Form airport-specific Community Advisory Boards (CABs) with rotating leadership from the community to ensure equitable representation in planning processes.
4. Net-Zero Emissions Infrastructure and Green Operations
   - Install high-efficiency LED lighting across taxiways, runways, and terminals, with smart sensors to reduce energy use during low activity periods; Leverage FAA's ZEV and VALE grant programs to fund electric bus charging, hydrogen trials, and smart grid installation.
5. Government and Community Engagement
   - Increase community representation on airport authority boards; Require independent auditing for all capital improvement programs over $5 million and publish progress reports quarterly.
6. Strategic Growth Management
   - Create scalable, modular terminal designs that allow flexible gate usage, seasonal staffing, and surge capacity adaptation; Implement AI-powered or advanced forecasting models to optimize gate assignments and staff schedules.
7. Sustainability-Focused Passenger and Staff Experiences
   - Build and design pilot sensory spaces, breastfeeding pods, and wayfinding apps for differently abled travelers; Maintain a high level of service standards while implementing low-carbon and sustainable amenities
     - Filtered water stations, compost bins, green-roof rest areas, and bike/scooter access routes

Best Practice Examples:

EV Vehicle Fleet

LAX People Mover

Solar Arrays

Long Beach Airport Taxiway L Reconstruction