To cope with the threat to aviation represented by the presence of volcanic ash in the atmosphere, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) established the International Airways Volcano Watch (IAVW) in November 1987. Since its establishment the IAVW has faced many challenges, which have been resolved through the cooperation of States and international organizations. Examples of this cooperation are the designation of nine volcanic ash advisory centres (VAACs) and the inclusion of State volcano observatories in ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs).

The Eyjafjallajökull eruption in April 2010 prompted ICAO, and the whole aviation community, to take urgent measures to address the crisis. Complementing ongoing efforts of the International Airways Volcano Watch Operations Group (IAVWOPSG), ICAO established in May 2010 the International Volcanic Ash Task Force (IVATF) to assist in the development of a global safety risk management framework to make it possible to determine safe levels of operation in airspace contaminated by volcanic ash.

Airframe and engine manufacturers, aviation safety regulators, operators, meteorological and vulcanological authorities and scientific communities, together with ICAO and other international organizations involved in the IVATF, are working to develop research results to be applied in an operational environment to enable a risk-management assessment.

These, and other important related issues, are currently being addressed by the above task force which held its first meeting at the ICAO Headquarters in Montreal, Canada in July 2010. This working paper reports on the composition, terms of reference, modus operandi, future work and deliverables expected from the IVATF.