
Intermodal sector calls for “fast, lean, pragmatic” measures to safeguard rail freight in the coronavirus crisis

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A group of organisations involved in the intermodal freight sector have published an open letter to European and Italian institutions emphasising the importance of acting in a ‘fast, lean, pragmatic way’ to safeguard rail transport as a strategic asset for the economy during the coronavirus outbreak.

The letter has been issued jointly by the Associazione Nazionale Imprese Trasporti Automobilistici, Associazione Operatori Ferroviari e Intermodali, ASSOLOGISTICA, FERCARGO, FERCARGO MANOVRA, FERCARGO ROTABILI, FERCARGO TERMINAL, Associazione per la Logistica Sostenibile, Unione Interporti Riuniti, European Shippers’ Council, European Rail Freight Association, Netzwerk Europäischer Eisenbahnen and International Union for Road-Rail Combined Transport.

The organisations said the coronavirus crisis will have serious repercussions for logistics chains. While restrictions imposed by the Italian government on March 8-9 do not directly limit freight transport, they will have a significant effect on logistics and the economy, and further restrictions could follow.

‘The European dimension deserves particular attention, considering the industrial interdependence of the companies on our continent and the rapid extension of the epidemic in many countries’, said the letter. ‘The Italian economy is closely linked to the markets of central and northern Europe. If the flows of goods do not work, there is a risk of the collapse of the entire economy.’

‘In this context rail transport, both intermodal and conventional, plays a strategic role, as it moves large quantities of goods over long distances, with fixed and monitorable routes, and with a limited use of staff that can be easily controlled from a health point of view.’

Since the beginning of the coronavirus emergency, logistics companies have adopted a series of measures to protect people involved. This includes shifting ‘a significant amount’ of freight to rail to reduce the movement of drivers crossing Europe; two train crew can move 40 semi-trailers, while a terminal handling 20 pairs of trains a

day uses 60 railway staff to move goods that would otherwise require 800 lorry drivers.

The organisations highlighted specific measures needed by the intermodal sector:

- clear and transparent communication at institutional level, avoiding counterproductive alarmism, with strong reference to the strategic role of intermodal transport;
- recognition that transshipment terminals are an essential link requiring special attention;
- safeguarding intermodal transport through interventions co-ordinated with the civil protection and regional authorities as well as at a central level to ensure uniform procedures;
- blocking rail transport would be 'counterproductive from the point of view of public health and should therefore be avoided at all costs';
- avoiding the risk of contagion by containing the number of contacts between people;
- digitalisation and administrative simplification;
- introducing well-tested administrative systems without complicated criteria;
- actions to support labour costs at companies that reduce activity owing to a significant drop in volumes;
- deferral of expected payments due to lack of liquidity;
- deferral for one month of all administrative formalities;
- hyper-amortisation to facilitate investments.

The organisations also included a list of the benefits of intermodal freight in terms of limiting the amount of contact between logistics sector staff and reducing the need for lorry drivers to travel long distances.

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