

Combi Transport: Driving backwards

// BY PETER MACKAY ON 17 APR 2024

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The modal shift to get freight off the roads has long been a lynchpin of Europe's emissions policy but, says ECTA, it is just not happening

EU authorities have set tough targets for decarbonisation in all walks of life and business areas; they are enshrined in the Green Deal and the European Commission's 'Fit for 55' document. For the transport sector, it is taken as understood that road is the least sustainable mode of all and that getting freight off the roads and onto rail or inland waterway provides a simple way of reducing the environmental impact of moving product.

The European Chemical Transport Association (ECTA) is worried about how this is playing out; its members – transport service providers to the chemical industry – have been investing in combined transport solutions over the past few decades, the better to enable this modal shift, but recent data suggests that the modal shift has gone into reverse.

Based on the annual Responsible Care reports submitted by its members, ECTA calculates that the share of shipments using combined transport has fallen consistently over the past five years. In 2019, 47.8 per cent of shipments went entirely by road and 52.2 per cent at least partly by rail; by 2023, road's share had gone up to 54.6 per cent and rail's share had fallen to 45.4 per cent.

ECTA says that combined transport is seen as an important enabler of the EU's Green Deal but, in some major countries, the desired modal shift is going in the wrong direction. The reasons are clear: rail networks lack the capacity needed to handle the additional freight; the punctuality of train operators is not as good as it needs to be; infrastructure works exacerbate the lack of punctuality and cause further reductions in carrying capacity; all this leads to delays and cancelled trains. Shippers who need reliability are not finding it in the rail sector, ECTA says.

WRONG TURN

What is worse, ECTA says, is that some countries are actively working against the modal shift. In Germany, for instance, the government has decided to cut subsidies for rail operations in the Route Promotion Act (Trassenförderungsgesetz or 'Trafög'). National decisions such as these are in contradiction with EU policy and should be revised, ECTA stresses.

Despite the actual situation, ECTA and its members will continue to invest in combined transport solutions. "We believe that this mode of transport does not only contribute to a reduction of emissions, combined transport also positively contributes to the competitiveness of the European economy and the overall mobility across Europe," ECTA says. "We trust that the chemical industry players will follow us along this path."

ECTA has been supportive of recent efforts by the European Commission to amend the Council Directive 92/106/EEC on intermodal transport (the 'Combined Transport Directive' or CTD), saying that an update of the support framework will be instrumental in meeting the ambitions of the Green Deal as well as the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy.

However, ECTA has also challenged the proposals, particularly as regards their limiting definition of combined transport, which does not reflect the complexity of international intermodal transport. ECTA says it is inappropriate to regard each individual shipment as a potential 'combined transport' operation, since combined transport only works through the aggregation of individual road transport demand on a certain lane and bundling that demand to a train or vessel. "Combined transport is a complex system. Its definition cannot be reduced to an external cost saving target on each individual journey," ECTA stresses.

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