

November 12th 2008 – Given the chronic congestion of the road and motorway networks and the rising cost of fuel, the transport of goods by rail is a competitive alternative to road transport and should become the preferred means of transport in the future. Legislation proposed as a result of the Grenelle Environment Forum held November 2007, which aims to increase the percentage of freight that is not transported by road to 25% by 2012 (it is currently 14%) and reduce carbon emissions by 20% by 2020, is a step in this direction.

In addition to the deregulation of passenger transport, European authorities have voted for the progressive liberalization of freight transport, starting with international transport between Member States, and this in the general context of a more favorable business climate in France.

Since 2003, independent operators have been allowed to operate on French soil. The management of freight links is the responsibility of the French Rail Network (RFF), which issues operating and safety licenses to transport operators and provides manpower training. Railway freight transport has been deregulated since March 31, 2006, and a Railway Regulatory Commission (CRAF), responsible for ensuring open access to all railway operators, is currently being set up. Private operators have also appeared alongside the traditional national operators in the specialized train, chemical products, foodstuffs (cereals) and bulk load (cement, gravel, iron) sectors. The new operators are often subsidiaries of traditional operators, for example DB Schenker (German), Euro Cargo Rail (subsidiary of the British EWSI group), BLS Cargo (Swiss), CFF Cargo (subsidiary of Swiss railways), CFL Cargo (Luxemburg railways and Arcelor Mital), VFLI (subsidiary of the French SNCF), Veolia Cargo (subsidiary of Veolia Transport), Rail 4 Chem (German BASF), and Europorte 2 (subsidiary of Eurotunnel). These operators are also developing their activities in the part loads market, which provides an alternative to HGV goods transport.

Combined rail-road, or multimodal, transport is well developed in the container sector. The transfer of HGV trucks onto rail networks is expanding with the development of wide-load (B+) capacity on major axes and the introduction of specialized rolling stock using traditional technology (German and Swiss rolling roads) or new technology such as the Modalohr (Lorry Rail) trailer wagon. Classic combined transport is represented in France by Naviland (ex CNC) and Novatrans. These technological developments are accompanied by infrastructure works, such as the opening of the Perpignan-Luxemburg rail link, major trans-alpine tunnels such as the Lötschberg or the Gotthard railway tunnel running from north to south, which will be completed by connections running north to west and south to east, for example (Alpine rolling road) that is currently being built, as well as wide-load adjacent tunnels between Lyon and the new Modane entrance. In addition, the launch of the Lyon-Turin railway tunnel is a key link in the European railway transport network, linking regions lying between Barcelona and Budapest.

The opening up of docks platforms to the general rail network, via the modernization of bundles and sidetracks, and their operation by operators that are also authorized to run on plain track (Rail 4 Chem, Veolia, VFLI...) aims to attract flows of freight traffic, especially on new specialized links which connects the ports to their surrounding areas. One example would be the modernization of the line that connects to the Le Havre docks, which circumvents Rouen and the narrow-load Seine corridor and avoids the bottleneck of Paris triage.

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