

CI-Online – 8 October 2009

French get serious about rail by Matthew Beddow



Speaking at Coastlink's annual conference in Dunkirk at the end of last month, Wim Blomme, intermodal director of P&O Ferrymasters, added his name to those complaining in the French shippers' association (AUTF) about France's poor rail services. He claimed that the main players' commercial approach still needed to be made more helpful, their problem solving methods improved, and pro-active communications lines speeded up.

Speaking afterwards, he lamented: 'Consultation with customers also remains very poor. Until such things are improved, we will continue to route as much cargo as possible through more reliable transit countries, such as our traffic between northern Europe and Italy, where we enjoy high service levels from the German and Swiss network/service providers.'

Such comments help to explain why the French Government has recently said that it is prepared to spend EUR7 (USD10.3) billion on infrastructure improvements. If it means what it says, it will lead to a significant transfer of traffic from road to more environmentally friendly rail transport over the next five years.

Loss-making SNCF Freight, the state-owned organisation through which much of the action will be passed, has since announced a rescue plan that pledges to spend EUR1 (USD1.47) billion on redesigning its freight business in such a way that ensures rail freight's share of the French market climbs from 14% to 25% by 2022.

The plan looks impressive, but as this is its sixth rescue plan in 12 years, customers are entitled to question if it may be full of yet more empty promises. The Government's financial support suggests otherwise.

As far as maritime traffic is concerned, SNCF Freight envisages the following intermodal developments:

- the creation of a market leader by the end of the year. In this respect, it is interesting to note that SNCF Freight is currently in the process of regaining majority control of Novatrans, the intra-European cargo specialist, which works alongside SNCF's Naviland Cargo, whose focus is more on maritime traffic, and it is easy to see the two being combined
- a 50% increase in the number of trains operating between Lille and Perpignan, up to 12 trains a week by the end of 2009
- a 30% subsidy increase, from EUR12 (USD17.6) per unit to EUR15.6 (USD23) per unit, also by the end of the year.
- the establishment of 1,000m long trains between Paris and Marseilles by the end of 2011.

Further help is to be provided through the creation of a more effective port railway operator in Le Havre and La Rochelle by the end of this year. The same will apply to other ports next year. Next year will also see construction start on a new multimodal marshalling yard in Le Havre, which should be completed by the end of 2012.