



Feature

Transport efficiency improvements require better coordination

Demand for freight haulage in Europe continues to rise, increasing the burden on both the climate and traffic flows. According to the EU, transport must be made more efficient to better meet increased demand. This requires enhanced interaction between different modes of transport. According to Swedish truck manufacturer Volvo Trucks, the solution lies in increased use of standardised load carriers.

The large amounts of traffic on European roads are causing ever bigger problems. Every day, tailbacks disrupt the traffic flow along 7,500 kilometres of roadway in and around European cities – that is almost 10 percent of the entire continent’s road network.

The EU Commission estimates the cost of these bottlenecks at more than EUR 80 billion annually. And that does not take into account the environmental aspect. Bearing in mind that the transport sector accounts for about 27 percent of the 4,500 million or so tonnes of carbon dioxide discharged every year, it is clear that Europe has a growing problem to deal with.

“There is no doubt that additional efforts must be made to solve Europe’s traffic problems,” says Nam Seok Kim, transport analyst at South Korea’s Transport Institute, KOTI.

He has recently completed a doctorate on combined freight systems in Europe, and is thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the continent’s traffic situation.

“The problem is that the steady growth in freight traffic is not occurring symmetrically across all traffic types,” he says.

Between 1995 and 2006, goods freight grew by a total of more than three percent annually. However, most of this volume increase was on roads, contributing to the fact that road transport now accounts for almost half of all goods transport in the EU.

“The crucial question is who should deal with the problem,” says Nam Seok Kim.



To balance the situation, the EU has financed a number of initiatives designed to stimulate the development of so-called intermodal transport – using a combination of trains, ships and trucks to transport goods throughout Europe.

“The EU and the member states’ governments can build roads and infrastructure, but problems concerning commercial transport must be solved through private initiatives,” explains Nam Seok Kim.

For several years, Volvo Trucks has conducted a project called EMS (European Modular System) which focuses on increased use of standardised load carriers such as exchangeable bodies and semitrailers as well as 20- and 40-foot containers to simplify integration between different traffic modes. The system is based on the 25.25 metre truck rigs that have long been in use in Sweden and Finland.

“We are lobbying hard for the EU to adopt 25.25 metre rigs in continental Europe too, since this would permit increased use of standardised load carriers and thus stimulate the growth of intermodal transports,” relates Ulf Ehrning, transport analyst at Volvo 3P, Volvo Trucks’ development company.

He explains that the current focus is on evaluating the EMS tests recently conducted in the Netherlands and Denmark, among other countries. Soon it will be time for Germany to test the system.

Critics claim that modular vehicles will steal freight from the railways.

“There is absolutely no conflict between longer trucks and rail or sea freight,” says Stefan Back, Chairman of the Road Transport Institute, CLECAT’s working group for road haulage, and continues:

“Modular vehicles are tailor-made for intermodal transport; their freight-carrying units can be transported by rail and by sea. There is absolutely no reason to pitch the various transport modes against one another. Instead, the focus should be on ensuring that they can develop both individually and together.”

Stefan Back also feels that modular vehicles would help ease the pressure on Europe’s overloaded road network.

“With longer truck combinations, two 25.25 metre rigs can replace three 18.75 metre rigs,” he says.



Volvo Trucks also runs its own tests on modular transport. For instance, the company has been testing 90-tonne 30 metre long timber haulers in regular operation in northern Sweden.

“Our tests show a 20 percent fuel saving per ton-kilometre by switching from regular, European 16.5 or 18.75 metre rigs to 25.25 metre combinations. And if you step up to 30 metre long rigs, you save as much again,” says Ulf Ehrning.

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Captions:

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Ulf Ehrning is a transport analyst at Volvo Trucks’ development company, Volvo 3P.

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Stefan Back is Sweden’s representative at European transport industry organisations CLECAT and FIATA, and is also the Chairman of the Road Transport Institute, CLECAT’s working group for road haulage.

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A 25.25 metre long rig. The maximum permitted length in countries such as Sweden and Finland.

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