



An alliance of influential European rail bodies have called on German rail infrastructure manager DB Netz to 'take full liability' over this summer's Rastatt landslide incident, and stop blaming railway operators for 'not being flexible' over an episode which resulted in huge losses for freight operators and customers.



The European Rail Freight Association (ERFA), the International Union for Road-Rail Combined Transport (UIRR) and the German Netzwerk Europäischer Eisenbahnen (Network of European Railways or NEE) are also holding neighbouring infrastructure managers to account over the the seven-week interruption of the Rhine Valley freight route, which has made 2017 a 'black year' for European rail freight, both operationally and financially.

'Lack of contingency plans'

In a strongly-worded joint statement, the three organisations say a lack of contingency plans and incompatible, underperforming re-routing options caused 'significant damage' to the whole value chain of rail freight transportation, as well as to the industries that have entrusted their cargoes to the sector.

Operations, they say, were difficult 'and in many cases nearly impossible' on the diversion routes proposed by DB Netz and the neighbouring infrastructure managers. Re-routed services via Germany, France and Austria were two to three times longer than the normal route along the Rhine Valley, requiring more locomotives and drivers. Diverted services through France and Austria meanwhile required 'completely different' resources in terms of locomotives authorised for those networks, driver skills and terminal capabilities, but only a small number could be sourced from neighbouring countries.

'Incurred high costs'

"Because of the Rastatt disruption, railway undertakings were forced to refuse transport orders by their customers and incurred extremely high costs to perform less than half their normal volume," say the three organisations. "The end customers widely appreciated the efforts of the railway undertakings under these difficult conditions, but nonetheless suffered severe consequences."

DB Netz, they said, was now 'analysing the incident' and making proposals on how to prevent such a 'catastrophic situation' happening again. "The sector organisations ERFA, NEE and UIRR appreciate and fully support this process...we recommend focusing on the major problems such as interoperability – deviation routes have totally different regulations and demands in terms of locos, drivers, language and train parameters – and improving contingency plans instead of blaming the railway undertakings for not being flexible enough; this diverts from the responsibility of DB Netz to offer a stable and marketable service to its customers."

Create reserve capacity

They propose the following measures:

1. Strengthen international freight traffic operations; infrastructure managers must switch from being nationally focused to an international management of rail freight traffic, with individual country's traffic control centres designating international border crossing specialists.
2. Introduce risk management and contingency plans for freight traffic: IM's must draw up pre-prepared contingency plans that secure re-routing with equal access parameters for at least 80 per cent of the volume.
3. Create reserve capacity & interconnect rail freight corridors; Transport ministries and IMs need to foresee reserve capacities in order to guarantee reliability as a prime requirement of end customers. Crucially, the Rhine-Alpine and North Sea-Mediterranean corridors must be developed as integrated, interchangeable systems with harmonised train parameters (740 metre trains, 4m profile).

Second language

4. Overcome language obstacles; A second operational language must be introduced both for train drivers and traffic controllers, or a technical solution sought. Key to this is the upcoming revision of the Train Driver's Directive.
5. Improve international crisis management; International rail freight needs to be prioritised by every European IM, both during normal operations and crisis situations. When there is a disruption, a high-level crisis management must be implemented immediately.

DB Netz, they add, have a 'clear responsibility and liability' to rail operators and customers who base their business on the assumption of unhindered access to a rail infrastructure. "DB Netz is responsible for the construction works in Rastatt and that risks were taken. After the incident, DB Netz decided alone on the duration of the interruption without consulting the rail freight sector about the possible operational and financial damage and the effects on the supply chain of European industry.

'Rebuild lost trust'

"We now request DB Netz to take full liability for the damages in the freight sector and to propose a clear, fair and easy structured financial settlement of the Rastatt incident within a short time. The freight sector expects a major contribution by DB Netz to rebuild the lost trust and to support the extra efforts in convincing customers that rail is still a reliable partner in

the supply chain."

While the three organisations see the Rastatt disruption as a symbol of a 'still incomplete and non-harmonized' European single rail freight market, there is now the the chance to analyse the failings and prepare better for the future. "The benchmark for European infrastructure managers must clearly be road transportation, where infrastructure and access for vehicles and drivers are almost totally harmonised," they add.

Extensive feedback

DB Netz has published its own statement, also focusing on the lessons that can be learned from Rastatt and addressing some of the points raised by ERFA and its partners. Acknowledging the line closure had hit the rail logistics chain, It says that Deutsche Bahn (DB Netze's parent company), Swiss Federal Railways, the Rhine Alpine Corridor and the rest of the industry are 'committed to better and internationally coordinated accident management, stressing that 'incidents with international effects can only be effectively managed together'.

All stakeholders, it says, have in recent weeks received extensive feedback on the closure of the track. "The experiences and suggestions of freight railways, public authorities, intermodal operators, terminals and other interested parties form the basis for the development of measures to prepare the sector for future major disturbances with an international dimension...Deutsche Bahn, SBB and the Rhine-Alpine corridor have already started work on the measures."

Standardised processes

An international incident management system is being set up, it says, to minimise the effects of major disruptions. "With the help of standardised processes for fast decision-making, information transfer and communication, the inclusion of a stable railway operator after an incident is accelerated. For this purpose, pre-coordinated diversion concepts should also serve.

"In addition to acute accident management, the experts are working to create the framework conditions for a more flexible production of international freight traffic. This includes, for example, finding suitable ways to overcome the language barriers in the sector," says DB Netze. Additional barriers being looked at, it says, are internationally divergent regulations, which 'complicate the cross-border use of personnel and trains'.

"The measures and the close cooperation of the participants is a signal in the industry, also with the aim to promote confidence in a reliable rail system," the statement adds.

Tags: DB Netz, ERFA, European Rail Freight Association, International Union for Road-Rail Combined Transport, NEE, Netzwerk Europäischer Eisenbahnen, Rastatt, UIRR



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