

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR COMBINED TRANSPORT?

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► The International Union of Road-Rail Combined Transport Operating Companies (UIRR) has recently organized a luncheon in the European Parliament to discuss the problems of the sector with parliamentarians and officials of the European Commission.

The nearly 6 percent year-on-year growth enjoyed since 1999 by its members in Road-Rail Combined Transport, the most dynamic segment of rail freight, turned into an estimated decline of about 20 percent (25 percent for unaccompanied and 15 percent for accompanied services) in 2009 as a consequence of the financial and economic crisis presently shaking the world. Based on the extensive fixed-costs, and the subsequent inability of the industry to rapidly intervene, UIRR lobbied the European Commission for relief action throughout the past 12 months. These lobby efforts materialized in but a letter by Transport Commissioner Antonio Tajani sent to the Member States, in which Ministers of Transport are reminded of the European rules for setting infrastructure access charges.

While the European Commission is entrusted with setting policy and adopting legislation for transport throughout Europe, the Union's budget contains only symbolic funding destined for achieving the goals and aims of European transport policy. Funding is predominantly left to the individual Member States, who's adherence with European policy goals is marred by

differing national conditions and the activities (and success) of their respective road lobbies.

Advocates of Combined Transport achieved success in the Brussels arena in 2009 through the revision of the funding rules of the Marco Polo program. Vital, though limited, subsidies are provided by the European Commission to reduce the risks of introducing new (combined transport) services, which aim at transferring transport volumes from road towards more sustainable modes like rail. Lower thresholds and a greater financing intensity coupled with simpler administrative obligations were introduced from 2010 to make the program more attractive.

The increasing attention paid to the issue of climate change, a leading motivator for several policy actions sought by Combined Transport operators, has materialized in the elevation of anti-climate change policy to the very top of political priorities of the new European Commission, and its President, José Manuel Barroso. Mr Barroso mentioned the curbing of CO₂ emissions, and the reduction of the carbon footprint of transport in particular, among the top three priorities of his new Commission. The commitment is reflected even in the structure of the new European Commission, which includes a Commissioner for Climate Action, besides that for the Environment, to deal with this political priority.

Road-Rail Combined Transport is an especially useful tool to achieve the goal of decarbonization in transport since the proportional CO₂ emissions experienced in unaccompanied Combined Transport is up to 60 percent less than road, while accompanied Combined Transport helps to save an increasing proportion - depending on the technology used for traction electricity generation - currently standing at 30 percent of CO₂ as compared with pure road transport. UIRR is conducting an active discourse with representatives of the European Commission's relevant General Directorates, Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), Environment (DG ENVI), and Climate Change (DG CLIM), on the development of policy changes needed to achieve the ambitious goals of reducing the carbon footprint of the European transport sector by 80 percent until 2050.

Based on the Interunit Capacity Study (of track and terminal loads), UIRR expects an 8 percent annual growth of Road-Rail Combined Transport to return from 2011.

This means that the current economics and financial crisis will have erased about three-years worth of growth from the sector. Hence, our conviction regarding a bright future for Road-Rail Combined Transport remains intact, however significant efforts and courage will be needed to deliver this potential from both industry (investors) and the political decision-makers. ■

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