

## Digital Automatic Coupler must work for intermodal

The industry association of European Combined Transport, UIRR, signed the Sector Statement on DAC<sup>i</sup>, the Digital Automatic Coupler under development for Europe's railways. The perspective of intermodal rail, which is the most dynamically expanding production system of rail freight, accounting for about half of the tonne-kilometres produced by freight trains in Europe today, must be upheld even if this performance is delivered with little more than 10% of the total fleet of freight wagon in Europe.

European railways use to this very day a 150-year-old coupler technology while other major railway jurisdictions such as North America, China or even India use some form of automatic coupler. Europe has made up its mind and wants to leap forward several generations by devising an automatic coupler that is also ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by promising it to be 'digital' as well.

The direction and the ambition are to be applauded. In the choice of a technology solution and then during the design of its roll-out, several factors must be taken into account:

- a. Rail freight is a competitive open market transportation service, which must turn a profit to those who invest in it. Those costs which exceed revenues, or those investment expenses which do not yield a return, must be avoided.
- b. The DAC functionality must be designed with a view to the needs of every user group, including intermodal rail freight. Since intermodal freight trains typically operate with closed wagon groups, the focus of DAC development must be on the 'digital' functions and capabilities, including electrification.
- c. The roll-out has to factor the technical complexity and cost of retrofitting the various wagon types, allowing for an incremental introduction that results in minimal disruption. The retrofitting of locomotives must also take these needs into account.
- d. The requirement to continuously operate intermodal rail freight while the roll-out is implemented will mean additional complexity. The creation of an intermodal task force should be considered.

Should the regulator insist on an accelerated roll-out, all expenses should then be covered by the regulator as the sector cannot be expected to cover expenses without the prospect of a reasonable return. UIRR looks forward to a continued contribution to the development of a DAC roll-out plan that satisfies the four considerations outlined above.

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Ralf-Charley Schultze

***"Intermodal rail freight needs and wants modernisation and development to improve infrastructure capacity, punctuality and reliability. As such the DAC development is also highly anticipated and the sector statement supported. However, it must be ensured that any advanced offer returns commensurate to its costs."*** – cautioned UIRR President Ralf-Charley Schultze.

### Who is UIRR?

Founded in 1970, the **International Union for Road-Rail Combined Transport (UIRR)** represents the interests of European road-rail Combined Transport Operators and Transhipment Terminal Managers.

Road-Rail Combined Transport (CT) is a system of freight forwarding which is based on efficiently and economically inserting electric rail into long-distance (road) transport-chains through the use of intermodal loading units (ILU).

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.uirr.com/en/media-centre/press-releases-and-position-papers/2023/mediacentre/2599-dac-sector-statement.html>