

Open Letter

*An appeal from the rail freight transport industry
to politicians and railway management*

to:

Patrick Schnieder, Federal Minister of Transport
Evelyn Palla, Chairwoman of the Management Board of Deutsche Bahn

29.10.2025

Shift back from rail to road

Save combined transport!

Dear Mr Schnieder,
Dear Ms Palla,

for many years, combined transport was the growth driver of rail freight transport – a beacon of hope for a successful climate and transport policy. From road to rail – it seemed obvious, with annual growth rates of three to seven per cent.

But that is now over. After years of creeping decline of the German rail infrastructure, freight transport performance is miserable, reliability is at rock bottom, and production costs are skyrocketing due to train cancellations, diversions and delays.

And now there are also **corridor renovations** – in addition to the many existing construction sites, disruptions and bottlenecks. Diversions are being proposed for the six-month full closures, but their economic viability is uncertain. Experience from previous construction phases shows that **restrictions such as shorter trains, route profiles unsuitable for freight transport or significantly longer travel distances** are to be expected. Such conditions jeopardise the competitiveness of rail freight transport and lead to train cancellations and a shift of traffic to the roads.

In addition, **the costs of rail use are constantly rising**. Since 2023, track access charges in Germany have risen by 19% and further increases of between 25 and 35% are expected for 2026. Penalties are imposed for short-term cancellations – even though many cancellations are a direct result of poor network quality. Even the storage of railway wagons now incurs considerable costs – those wagons that have to be taken out of service due to a lack of competitiveness.

The result: **rail's competitiveness is dwindling**. While rail prices are rising, road costs remain stable or are falling. No wonder even long-standing customers are turning their backs on combined transport. Every day, we hear of **shifts back to road transport** – a process that happens quickly and is hardly reversible. Once a company has purchased new trucks and hired drivers, it usually stays there permanently.

The trend is already visible and documented. On the Rhine Valley axis via Switzerland, combined transport has declined by 7.6% in recent years, while road freight transport has increased by 7.2%, representing a shift back to road transport of 86,000 lorries. In the coming years, we expect **rail freight capacity to decline by 20 to 30%** as a result of corridor renovation, with hundreds of thousands of additional truck journeys. On the major transalpine corridors via Austria and Switzerland alone, this means **around 500,000 additional truck shipments** – with more emissions, more traffic jams and a higher risk of accidents.

The shift back to road transport would **make a mockery of the investments made by the federal government over decades in modern terminal infrastructure** – within the framework of the guideline for combined transport transshipment facilities.

The considerable European investments in rail infrastructure, such as the Gotthard and Brenner base tunnels, would **also be devalued in the medium to long term**. These projects were realised in the confidence that the Federal Republic of Germany, as an important business location and transit corridor, would provide the necessary capacity and thus make a significant contribution to **Europe's competitiveness in global comparison**, especially in relation to Asia.

Our demands – Save combined transport!

The indifference of transport policy towards combined transport **is worrying**. Yet functioning logistics is the lifeline of German industry. We are calling for short-term and medium-term measures to stop the impending dismantling of rail freight transport:

- **Zero increase in track access charges for 2026**
An immediate measure with a signal effect. What is possible for long-distance passenger transport must also apply to freight transport. Different treatment of transport modes contradicts the principle of non-discrimination.
- **Capacity guarantee of at least 90% of current transport performance**
For all corridor renovations and longer construction sites.
- **Upgrading of suitable diversion routes**
Same parameters for train length, train weight and train profile as on the main axes.
- **Allocation of train paths in the event of bottlenecks according to market demand**
Consideration of profile, train load and synchronisation in order to keep as many transports as possible on the railways.
- **Compensation for operating difficulties for inferior train paths during corridor renovations**
To support connections that would otherwise have to be discontinued. With financing via the CO2 toll, for example.
- **Suspension of cancellation fees**
Until an acceptable network quality is restored.

Dear Mr Schnieder, Dear Ms Palla,

We can no longer pretend that everything is fine. The security of supply for industry, the competitiveness of Germany as a business location, climate targets - and for many companies simply economic survival – are at stake.

We are ready to work with you to develop solutions that reconcile the need to renovate the infrastructure with the requirements of logistics. Our aim is to further develop combined transport as the backbone of sustainable, efficient and climate-friendly logistics – in the interests of the economy, society and the environment. The industry is ready to do its part.

Let's save combined transport.

Yours sincerely

**Companies and associations
in rail freight transport and combined transport**

ERFA European Rail Freight Association
Fermerci
Hupac
Kombiverkehr
SGKV Studiengesell. Kombiniertes Verkehr
TX Logistik
UIRR Union International Rail Road

Dirk Stahl, President
Giuseppe Rizzi, Director General
Michail Stahlhut, CEO
Armin Riedl and Heiko Krebs, Managing Directors
Clemens Bochynek, Director General
Albert Bastius, COO, and Dirk Steffes, CSO
Ralf-Charley Schultze, Director General