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Empty Containers Causing Congestion

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ECT's Delta Terminal at the Port of Rotterdam is the latest to issue notice that it cannot accept empty containers. APM Terminal already had such restrictions. The Port of Hamburg had earlier set limits on empty containers, leading to some diversions to Rotterdam, acknowledged Hans Smits, Port of Rotterdam's CEO.

There are no restrictions on loaded import containers, according to port authorities, but those containers will be stored outside the immediate operational area of the terminals after 14 days. "The measures are necessary to reduce the massive increase in the average time containers spend in the port and hence improve the flow," said Rotterdam authorities.

"Due to the growth spurt in the European economy, the increase in containers far exceeds the 10%-15% expansion in terminal capacity. It's down to imports from the Far East and South America," commented Smits. He added that rising Dutch and German exports have also contributed. Rotterdam is already a collection point for these containers, continued Smits, and with the increase in activities in the Baltic region, the return flow from there has increased proportionately.

Rotterdam is operating at full capacity, according to a statement released after the ECT announcement. In 2006, 378 million metric tons of goods were handled in the Port of Rotterdam, a 2.1% increase over 2005 and a new record. There was a 4% increase in the actual number of containers handled (9.7 million twenty-foot-equivalent units).


"Virtually the whole of the port is continuing to operate at full capacity," said Smits. The Betuweroute cargo rail system that opened in 2007 is also playing a role in increasing demand for Rotterdam, but growth will continue to be constrained until expansions can be completed.

The number of empty containers arriving at the Port of Rotterdam increased in 2006 to 1,068,774 TEUs vs. 995,640 TEUs in 2005 (about 7%). This compares with a 3% increase in the number of loaded containers in the same period (3,917,899 TEUs in 2006 vs. 3,804,896 TEUs in 2005).

Outgoing empty containers reached 950,582 TEUs in 2006 vs. 803,968 TEUs in 2005. That's an increase of nearly 16%. Loaded containers increased by roughly 2% measured by TEUs.

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