

## Freight operators hail Iberia's new gateway to Europe

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From this month the Iberian peninsula will be connected to the European standard-gauge network with the opening of the cross-border link between Figueras and Perpignan. Keith Barrow reports from Barcelona on how this new infrastructure could reinvigorate international railfreight operations to and from Spain.

THE TANGLE of broad gauge, standard gauge and mixed gauge tracks at the Spanish border station of Port Bou demonstrates graphically the enormous challenge of running freight trains to and from the Iberian peninsula. The track layout here has been adapted many times over decades as the process of changing wheelsets and transshipping loads has been honed, but any improvements in productivity pale against the swift passage of lorries across the border on the parallel E15 highway.

Rail's market share has fallen to such an extent that just 400 wagons per day now cross the French-Spanish border, compared with 19,800 lorries. Rail carries just 1% of the 237.3 million tonnes of freight that travels between Spain and the rest of Europe, while road has a 45% share and sea 54%.

The gauge barrier will become a thing of the past this month with the opening of the 44.4km mixed-traffic standard-gauge line between Perpignan and Figueras. The line is built and managed by TP Ferro, which has a 48-year operating concession, and has capacity for up to 95 passenger trains and 130 freight services per day.

South of Figueras, freight trains loop onto the existing line to Girona, which has been converted to mixed gauge before rejoining the new line at Mollet, where a junction has been built to allow freight trains to access the 43km line to Morrot and Barcelona Can Tunis yard. The conversion of this line to dual gauge, together with the installation of standard-gauge track in the port, means Barcelona's key intermodal hubs are now plugged into the European standard-gauge network.

The potential impact of this new connection was the focus of the Market Place Seminar held in Barcelona last month by the International Union of Railways (UIC) and the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations (Fiata). "There has been a common failure by different actors in the industry and it's fair to say rail's share of this market today is a disaster," Fret SNCF CEO Ms Sylvie Charles told delegates. "The change of gauge and the need to split or join trains at the border have long been operational challenges. The new line is a big opportunity for rail to end years of failure and offer something new."

Like the gauge difference, the disparity in maximum train length has hamstrung railfreight. While 750m-long trains are permitted in France the limit in Spain is 450m. The new standard-gauge link overcomes this problem and investment in Barcelona's port will allow terminals to accommodate 750m-long trains.

The first commercial freight train to traverse the new line on December 12 will be the Barcelyon Express intermodal service between Barcelona and Lyon Vénissieux. This twice-weekly service was launched in February 2009 and is jointly operated by Renfe Mercancías, SNCF subsidiary Naviland Cargo, and Barcelona Port. Naviland Cargo managing director Mr Philippe Le Petit said that even with the current gauge change it is achieving load factors of more than 90%, and the new line will allow the introduction of a Barcelona - Toulouse intermodal service next year.

Fret SNCF has decided against operating its own services into Spain and will instead work in partnership with its Spanish

counterpart Renfe Mercancías in this market. "Wherever we can find a good partner we will always choose to work with them and Renfe has the right strategy and resources for operating to and from Spain," says Charles.

Therefore Renfe locomotives and train crew will work as far as Perpignan before handing over to Fret SNCF. Renfe is currently modifying four class 252 electric locomotives and two class 319 diesels to operate on the new line.

International trade between Spain and Italy is worth €29.3 billion per year, but rail currently has a meagre 0.8% modal share of the freight market on this route. In an effort to increase rail traffic on this route, Trenitalia Cargo and Algeposa Intermodal, Spain have launched a project dubbed Sustainable Iron and Steel Transport by European Railways (Sister), which will provide a complete door-to-door logistics service with two multi-client services per week between Turin and Sagunto via the new line, and two trains between Monza and Irun. "Previously we used the French wagonload network, but this is not the dedicated service our customers require," explains Mr Fabio Consolo, director of foreign markets for Trenitalia. "By launching a direct link we can achieve high levels of quality and reliability." DB Schenker subsidiary Euro Cargo Rail will operate the trains on the French leg.

With the standard-gauge link to the rest of Europe now in place, rail has arguably its biggest opportunity in years to claw back market share in Iberia. However, no amount of infrastructure investment will overcome some of the other obstacles railfreight faces, such as incomplete liberalisation and the impact of strikes. Le Petit of Naviland Cargo says Barcelyon Express suffered as a result of the strikes over pension reforms that brought much of the French network to a standstill during October and November. SNCF says that during a two-week period in mid-October it was able to operate only around 10% of scheduled freight services.

"France is the Bermuda Triangle of railways - you can send a train there and lose it," says Mr Jose Luis González, chief of land operations for the Port of Barcelona. "It's not acceptable to have trains held up for a week because of a strike. Contingency plans have to be implemented, which often means reverting to road transport. This is a major disadvantage for rail."