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**Greg Knowler, Senior Europe Editor** | Feb 17, 2022 11:03AM EST



Regional European carriers such as Unifeeder are battling to maintain schedules as port congestion at hub ports delays vessels and disrupts shipments. Photo credit: Shutterstock.com.

Longer waiting times at European hub ports for feeder and short-sea vessels are adding voyage days and slowing the turnaround of ships and equipment, with the bottlenecks spreading to smaller ports in the regional network.

The ongoing hub port congestion has left feeder carriers facing “operational chaos,” amid poor schedule reliability from larger vessels demanding greater hub-and-spoke services and the deployment of additional regional capacity, according to Martin Gaard Christiansen, CCO of global feeders and CEO of Europe for intra-Europe specialist carrier Unifeeder.

“Port congestion has not eased with a combination of workforce being impacted by COVID-19, very high yard occupancy slowing down productivity, and continued poor mainliner schedule reliability

impacting planning and prioritization with larger tonnage getting the priority over feeders,” Christiansen told JOC.com this week.

Intra-Europe routes for European cargo is a specialist area serving manufacturing and time-sensitive shippers where ocean competes with road transport. The routes use 45-foot pallet-wide high cube containers that are not handled by the deep-sea carriers.

Christiansen said transit times for the intra-Europe trade are far more precise and time-sensitive — measured in days and hours — and much of the cargo is up against specific arrival times to support factory production lines or get goods onto shelves, such as the fruit and vegetable trade from Iberia to the UK.

With such poor schedule reliability, simply maintaining existing services requires an injection of additional capacity from Unifeeder, a DP World subsidiary.

“Significantly longer voyage days for feeders as a result of reduced productivity and waiting time at hub ports and slow turnaround at outports have forced us to deploy around 20 percent more capacity to carry the same volume,” Christiansen noted.

One in four ships arrived late in 2021 on Asia- North Europe

The most recent schedule reliability data for December puts Asia-North Europe carriers’ on-time performance at 22.9 percent, down from 40 percent in December 2020, according to Sea-Intelligence Maritime Analysis. The average delay for late vessels in December was just over nine days, versus six days a year earlier.

Ship arrival times worsened through 2021 as congestion built at ports at both ends of the Asia-North Europe trade lane, and the average schedule reliability for the full year was 24.4 percent compared with 68 percent for 2020.

Persistently late arrivals have resulted in carriers omitting ports and shortening port rotations on Asia-North Europe in a struggle to restore at least some schedule reliability. But those measures heavily disrupt the onward transportation of containers and are being implemented even as larger ships are deployed and call sizes are increasing.

Data from IHS Markit’s Port Performance Program shows that call sizes — the number of containers moved on and off a ship during a port stay — increased 13 percent at the North European ports of Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Felixstowe, and Bremerhaven in 2021 compared with the previous year. This trend has placed additional pressure on the overstretched terminals, with ships arriving out of windows contributing to surges in volume.

## Mega-ship calls place heavy demands on terminals

Handling larger vessels generates an enormous amount of activity, as outlined by Hans Nagtergaal, head of containers at Rotterdam, in an interview late last year. He told JOC.com a single vessel with a call size of 10,000 TEU, a common container exchange for the mega-ships calling at Rotterdam, would involve 6,000 terminal moves, 10 trains, 2,000 trucks, 28 barge calls, and five feeder ship calls. There can be several ships of over 20,000 TEU handled in the ports of Rotterdam or Antwerp at the same time.

Under the current logistics environment with delayed ships and pandemic-related labor shortages, the rising volumes being exchanged in port calls were proving increasingly costly and disruptive to feeder and short-sea operations, Christiansen told JOC.com.

“We see that larger mainline tonnage in key east-west trades being deployed is driving more hub-and-spoke business and the need for more contingency planning around multi-hubs is contributing to main-

line carriers looking to regional feeder operators to support them,” he said.

Unifeeder is the largest feeder operator in the intra-Europe trade with a 6.2 percent share and capacity of 61,057 TEU, according to Alphaliner. Its nearest feeder rival, X-Press Feeders, operates 32,383 TEU.

Alphaliner noted that Mediterranean Shipping Co., with almost 310,000 TEU capacity, dominates the intra-Europe shipping market, operating a third of the total capacity on the regional trade.

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