

Planned Vancouver mega-container terminal wins environmental clearance



The lack of available industrial real estate in downtown Vancouver (pictured) has driven container marine terminal development such as the planned Robert Banks Terminal 2 outside city limits. Photo credit: Natalia Bratslavsky / Shutterstock.com.

Mark Szakonyi, Executive Editor | Apr 21, 2023, 1:03 PM EDT

Canada's federal government on Thursday gave conditional environmental approval to a planned C\$3 billion mega-container terminal in Vancouver, a major milestone the port authority has sought since 2013.

The Vancouver Fraser Port Authority still needs to attract a private company or a consortium to build and operate Robert Banks Terminal 2 (RBT2). The port authority — which has sought a new terminal for two decades and has said it could bring the facility online in the early 2030s — must also meet 370 legally binding conditions tied to environmental and wildlife regulations and Indigenous land rights.

“With this approval, we can advance one of Canada’s most important trade infrastructure projects to date, bolster our national supply-chain resilience, and deliver generational economic benefits for Canadians and Canadian businesses,” Robin Silvester, president and CEO of the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority, said in a statement.

The RBT2 terminal would have an annual capacity of 2.4 million TEU, giving Canada’s largest container gateway enough capacity to avoid congestion while growing volumes, according to the port authority. The agency says the gateway will reach capacity in the middle to late part of this decade, with a recent DP World terminal expansion giving the port some capacity in the meantime.

Expansion spat with GCT

In recent years, Vancouver has experienced sporadic spikes in congestion, often tied to poor weather and strong import volumes, but over the past year it’s been a lack of railcars rather than berth space that’s driven the disruptions.

The port authority has attempted to block GCT, Vancouver’s largest container terminal operator tenant, from expanding its Deltaport facility by adding another berth. GCT calls its plan a more environmentally friendly expansion that would increase Deltaport’s annual capacity and could be built in half the time that RBT2 would.

The International Longshore and Warehouse Union Canada, which is negotiating a new contract with West Coast waterfront employers, in February told Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that automation at RBT2 would cost the country jobs. ILWU Canada’s existing contract allows for some automation, and port experts say that some degree would have to be deployed at RBT2 given the scale of the project.

In response to the ILWU warning about job loss linked to automation, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority said the company chosen to operate RBT2 will determine the “final configuration and operating concept for the terminal.”

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