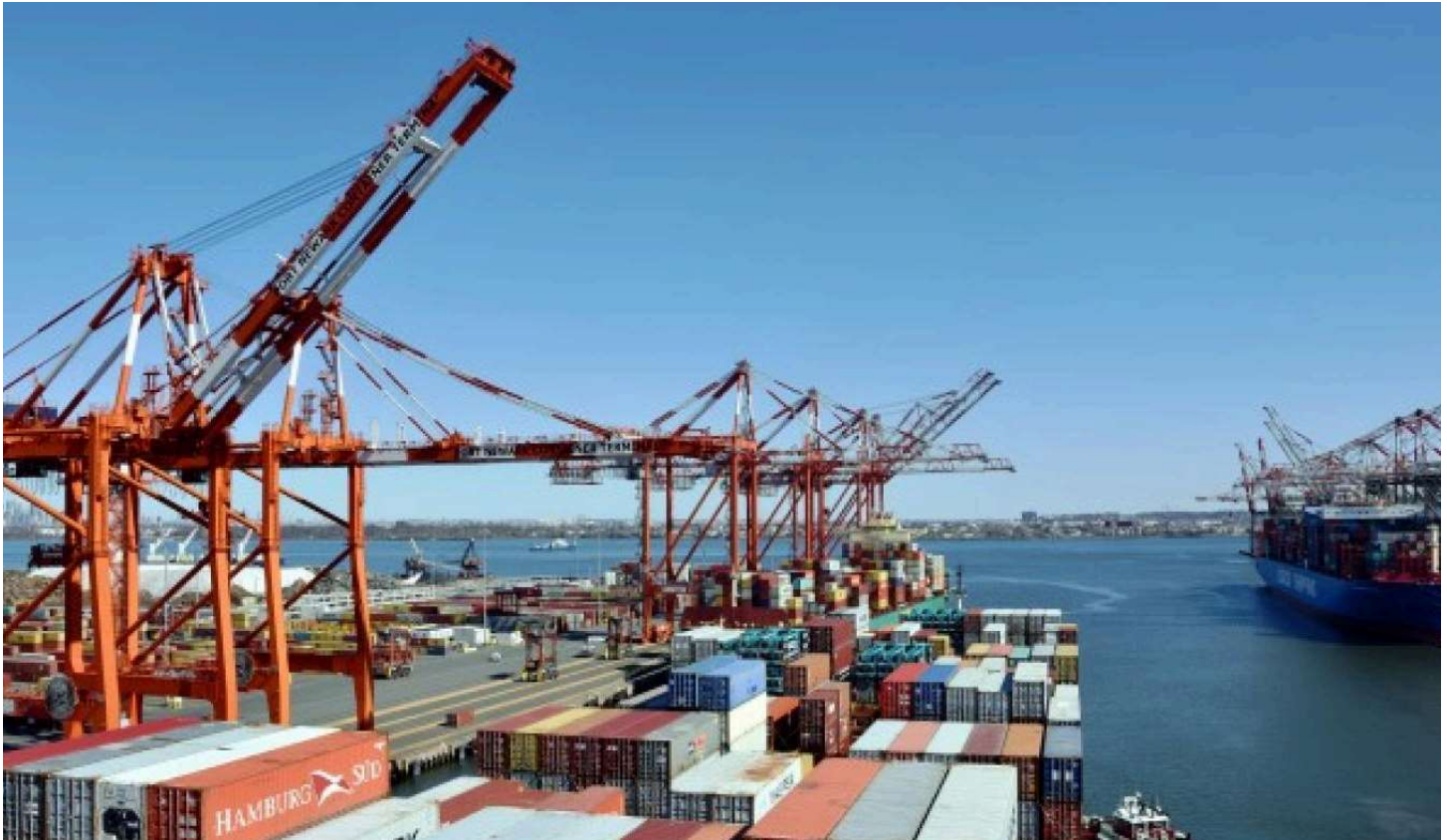


East Coast ports expand hours to handle Baltimore diversions



The governor of Maryland did not offer a timeline on when the Port of Baltimore would reopen, citing the complexity of the salvage operations ahead. Photo credit: Mariusz Bugno / Shutterstock.com.

Michael Angell, Associate Editor | Mar 29, 2024, 5:59 PM EDT

US East Coast port operators say they are prepared to handle container ships diverting from Baltimore, following its Tuesday closure due to a major bridge collapse, with marine terminals in New Jersey and Virginia expanding gate hours, CSX Transportation revving up more intermodal service and Baltimore-based truckers looking for work at those other ports.

The Maryland Port Administration said Friday it has no idea when it will reopen Baltimore to vessel traffic, which means the influx of traffic to other Northeast and mid-Atlantic ports could last several months. After the debris from the collision of the 9,962-TEU *Dali* into the Francis Scott Key Bridge is removed, the US Army Corps of

Engineers will still have to determine if there was damage to the 50-foot-deep, 800-foot-wide ship channel.

“It will be a while before we get to that point,” US Coast Guard Petty Officer Third Class Carmen Caver said in statement to the *Journal of Commerce*.

Officials from the Port of New York and New Jersey who briefed shippers and other stakeholders at a meeting this week said one “ad hoc” vessel originally destined for Baltimore already dropped off cargo at the port and four more are scheduled to arrive in the next few weeks, according to people who attended the meeting.

During the meeting, port officials downplayed any major impact to terminal operations; most of the services that call Baltimore also call New York-New Jersey, so it’s just a matter of discharging more containers from ships that are already scheduled to visit the port. Still, officials said the diversions from Baltimore could last as long as three months.

Bethann Rooney, port director for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ), told the *Journal of Commerce* the port’s experience in handling a 20% surge in cargo during the COVID-19 pandemic “allows our port to provide additional East Coast capacity as needed.”

Diverted ships already arriving

Most of the diverted ships are likely to call Port Newark Container Terminal (PNCT), which handles most of the Mediterranean Shipping Co. vessels calling New York-New Jersey. In response, PNCT is keeping its truck gates open until 6 pm, rather than closing at 4 pm, as of April 1. Starting April 6, PNCT will also open Saturdays from 7 am to 3 pm for an indeterminate period.

APM Terminals Port Elizabeth is also handling freight that would normally land in Baltimore. It received the 10,062-TEU *Maersk Yukon* and 8,238-TEU *MSC Everest VIII* on Thursday, both of which had been scheduled to call Baltimore over the next two weeks.

Next Tuesday, CSX Transportation is expected to start a daily north-south service from the New York-New Jersey port and its Kearny, NJ, intermodal terminal to Baltimore. According to people familiar with the operation, CSX will be running trains of approximately 6,000 feet that will be able to bring about 150 import containers to Baltimore’s Seagirt marine terminal for local pick-up and match back empties for the return trip.

Along with Baltimore freight, port officials said there has been an increase in the number of Maryland-based truck drivers registering for service at the New York-New Jersey marine terminals to handle the freight.

Rooney said PANYNJ has been working with its counterparts in Baltimore to “transfer ID information, allowing truckers who would have serviced Baltimore quick entry to the Port of New York and New Jersey.”

The Association of Bi-State Motor Carriers, which represents intermodal carriers at the port, told the *Journal of Commerce* it has “ample trucking capacity available as a result of ongoing efforts to ramp up the driver workforce during the pandemic volume surge, so we’re confident we’ll be able to absorb the extra cargo that comes our way.”

The Port of Virginia said another diverted vessel, Evergreen Marine’s 14,354-TEU *Triton*, discharged an additional 1,103 containers that were originally bound for Baltimore during its regular call at the Virginia International Gateway terminal. The first of those containers was picked up on Friday. MSC is also diverting three of its vessels to Norfolk over the next week.

Similar to PNCT, Virginia is extending its gate hours, opening at 5 am instead of 6 am, Harris said. He also noted that about 80 Maryland-based trucking companies have recently registered to work at the port.

“The Port of Virginia has ample capability to process the immediate container cargo diversion from Baltimore and, depending on the timing of the channel reopening in Baltimore, any medium-term customer needs,” said Joe Harris, spokesperson for the Port of Virginia. “Container operations here are proceeding as normal here and we do not foresee this situation placing any stress on our operation.”

Path to reopening

Underscoring the difficulty of reopening Baltimore to ship traffic — and the possible duration of the closure — Gov. Wes Moore said 4,000 tons of bridge debris will need to be cut into four pieces so they can be hauled up by the US Navy’s largest crane, which can handle a 1,000-ton payload. The process will be even more time-consuming due to hazardous conditions in the water and onboard the *Dali*, with detailed planning needed for each phase of the removal.

“This is a remarkably complex operation,” Moore said during a Friday press briefing. Seven floating cranes will be deployed for the recovery, along with ten tugboats, nine barges and eight salvage vessels, he added.

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