

Tariff uncertainty causes plunge in US cargo bookings at Asia load ports



US retailers on Wednesday significantly downgraded their projections for imports over the next several months. Photo credit: ADLC / Shutterstock.com.

Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor and Michael Angell, Senior Editor | Apr 9, 2025, 4:41 PM EDT

Cargo bookings on vessels leaving Asia bound for the US over the next few weeks have fallen 20% to 30% as retailers delay the receipt of non-critical freight in the aftermath of the widespread global tariffs implemented by the Trump administration, sources tell the *Journal of Commerce*.

And the chilling effect of the tariffs is extending further down the calendar. Freight forwarders in the trans-Pacific trade say US retailers are holding off making purchase orders with factories in Asia for fall and holiday merchandise for 30 to 60 days.

“It has changed dramatically today. For China cargo, we have had many customers suspend all China shipments,” said Patrick Fay, CEO and co-founder at forwarder BOC

International. Fay added most customers are suspending rather than canceling orders, pushing bookings down 30%.

Befitting the chaos that has marked the on-again, off-again nature of the tariff rollout, President Donald Trump on Wednesday afternoon announced in a social media post he was lowering the widely varied “reciprocal” tariffs on all countries — except China — to a 10% baseline for 90 days. And in what has become a near-daily escalation of the trade war with Beijing, Trump said he was again raising tariffs on goods imported from China, this time to 125%.

Meanwhile, the decline in vessel bookings is reflected in data. According to maritime visibility provider Vizion and data and analytics company Dun & Bradstreet, some 225,900 TEUs of US imports from Asia were booked in the last seven days, down from about 633,000 TEUs booked the week prior.

A source at an ocean carrier said he has heard talk of as much as 70% of bookings being canceled this week, but acknowledged that number is probably too high.

“I think 20%-30% is a safe number,” the source said, echoing the views of forwarders who spoke with the *Journal of Commerce*.

Rachel Shames, vice president of pricing and procurement at the forwarder CV International, said retailers attempting to plan for what volumes to ship is “the big challenge.”

“Deciding on their volume is the big question mark [in the wake of the tariffs],” she said.

US retailers on Wednesday, meanwhile, significantly downgraded their projections for imports over the next several months, chalking it up to uncertainty over tariffs.

But the carrier source said he expects imports will pick up strongly during the late summer to fall peak shipping season, saying the tariff negotiations between the US and most Asian nations outside of China should produce some clarity for importers by the key peak season.

“Once the tariffs settle down, except for China, there should be clarity,” the source said. “Q2 will be bad, but we may see a rebound in Q3.”

Waiting for carrier response

Even with the drop in bookings, ocean carriers have yet to respond with any significant withdrawal of capacity. For the month of April, ocean carriers have plans to cancel 19

sailings to the Southern California ports, according to forwarder Spedag Americas, amounting to a nearly 14% capacity drop during the month. The Pacific Northwest ports will see 10 fewer sailings during April, amounting to a 20% capacity withdrawal.

April's blank sailings, though, come against a backdrop of seasonally weaker demand ahead of shippers ramping up bookings for summer and back-to-school merchandise.

However, in a sign of slowing or flat demand further ahead, Ocean Network Express said Tuesday it would not resume its previously suspended PN4 service to the Pacific Northwest in May as had been expected.

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