

US chassis providers getting equipment ready for US import surge



TRAC Intermodal and DCLI are the two largest third-party marine chassis lessors in the US. Photo credit: Sheila Fitzgerald / Shutterstock.com.

Ari Ashe, Senior Editor | Jun 9, 2025, 1:50 PM EDT

As an expected wave of imports from China begins arriving at US ports in the coming weeks, the country's three largest marine chassis providers say they are pulling idle equipment from storage, inspecting and repairing units, and repositioning chassis to key inland hubs to avoid a repeat of the shortages seen during the pandemic.

TRAC Intermodal, DCLI and FlexiVan Leasing, the US' top three lessors by fleet size, respectively, began unstacking chassis shortly after the Trump administration last month announced a 90-day pause on the 145% tariffs on Chinese imports.

TRAC owns more than 200,000 marine chassis, while DCLI has about 140,000 units and FlexiVan about 120,000. None of the companies disclosed the number of chassis

they've taken out of long-term storage, but each said the total is in the "tens of thousands."

"Our current utilization, our working fleet, is rather soft," said Val Noel, chief operating officer of TRAC. "But we think this could be a little bit like a tsunami, and we want to have extra capacity to make sure we don't have any service disruptions."

TRAC will focus on repairing and positioning chassis in Chicago, Dallas and Memphis. Noel said chassis placed into Memphis can be redeployed to Kansas City, St. Louis and Omaha, if necessary, while chassis in Chicago can be redirected to the Ohio Valley.

DCLI began unstacking equipment in Southern California days after the tariff pause announcement and has since expanded the process to inland locations including Chicago, Dallas and Memphis.

"We have safety stocks in place in key markets and are working with our vendors to ensure we have the repair capacity necessary to respond to this demand," said Mike O'Malley, DCLI's senior vice president of government and public relations.

FlexiVan, which is exiting Southern California's Pool of Pools, has focused on ensuring chassis availability for its core partner, Ocean Network Express (ONE).

"[We are] working continuously to get pool chassis into a ready to use condition and fleet into our private pool for ONE and other customers," Flexi said in a statement to the *Journal of Commerce*.

FlexiVan in late April opened its new private chassis pool serving the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, with FlexiVan Pool "designed to enhance our service capabilities for carriers and customers."

Getting repairs done now

The chassis providers emphasized that pulling equipment out of long-term storage is not a one-day process. Units stacked for months, sometimes years, must undergo full inspections and safety checks, and in many cases, minor repairs before they are roadworthy.

It can take several weeks to check lighting systems, brake lines, tires and structural components that can rust, corrode or suffer other weather-related fatigue. Technicians must also be available in sufficient numbers, and often work overtime, to meet repair deadlines.

DCLI said it's better prepared than during the pandemic because it did not significantly scale back repair operations with repair vendors when the market softened. DCLI said it learned how important it is to keep mechanics working even as volumes soften because widespread layoffs require rehiring and training later, which makes it difficult to complete repairs before a cargo surge.

As a result, DCLI believes it can quickly inspect, repair and certify idle chassis without having to rebuild labor capacity from scratch.

Communication is key

Knowing when and where to deploy repaired units is crucial to prevent equipment shortages. Chassis providers rely on cargo forecasts from ocean carriers, railroads and shippers and data from the US Department of Transportation's Freight Logistics Optimization Works (FLOW) initiative to position chassis ahead of surges.

Under normal conditions, imports going to secondary cities such as Cincinnati, Columbus or St. Louis can be part of a block within a larger train to Chicago or Kansas City. During a surge, however, those cities may receive dedicated trains with double or triple the usual number of containers, flooding local terminals and straining chassis availability.

"That's one of the things that has beaten us in the past," Noel acknowledged.

"Normally a city might get a 3,000-foot block of containers, and during a surge it's a 10,000-foot train. Both of our western roads (BNSF Railway and Union Pacific Railroad) have been super in partnering with us, letting us know what's coming so we can be prepared."

The landscape has also changed in recent years in ways that may increase supply chain resiliency.

More trucking companies and cargo owners now operate private chassis fleets, reducing their reliance on shared pool equipment. Railroads have also adjusted terminal operations, placing more import containers into grounded stacks, allowing cargo owners to retrieve loads using their own equipment and easing pressure on the public pools managed by DCLI, TRAC, and FlexiVan.

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