

Mixed prospects for express cargo trains in Europe

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by Paul Needham



Picture: TGV

The prospects for diverting express and freight shipments in Europe from air and road transportation to more environmentally-friendly high-speed rail services are promising but remain caught up in financial and political problems, experts said in a discussion at last month's Transport Logistic trade fair in Munich.

Factors such as night restrictions at airports, increasing road congestion and high-speed rail technology made the potential for using rail to carry express and freight shipments within Europe more attractive, said Eckhard Kuhla, managing director of EKonsult GmbH, told an audience of industry managers.

"We are going to see a new product from integrators and the air cargo industry," he declared. Trains operating at speeds of more than 200 km/h could link airports at night, replacing flights and truck journeys. Rail feeder services could market themselves as "better than road, cheaper than air", he said. In terms of the overall investment, each cargo freight train could cost about €15 million, he added.

With Euro-Carex and Air Cargo Express, two major projects have been launched to try to set up rail services to carry express and freight shipments between major European airports. Euro-Carex is a Paris-based organisation seeking to link up various Western European airports, while Air Cargo Express would focus on the Leipzig-Frankfurt route and other German destinations.

Euro-Carex plans to run high-speed trains between a new express freight station at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport, Lyon, Liege, Amsterdam, Lille and London in a first phase from 2012, and then extend the network eastwards to Cologne and Frankfurt and southwards to Bordeaux and Marseille. Italy and Spain could potentially be linked at a later stage.

Euro-Carex president Yanick Paternotte has said in the past that the organisation will initially employ 8 high speed trains specially designed for air cargo with a capacity to transport up to 100 tons of express shipments per train every night. He puts the investment at €600 million for trains and €300 for terminals. The key project members include French railway operator SNCF, Air France Cargo, FedEx, La Poste, TNT and UPS.

Dierck Näther, managing director of Leipzig/Halle airport, told the Munich conference that the airport's €30 million rail freight station, located next to the DHL Express air hub, is now operational. The aim of Air Cargo Express (ACE) was to operate twice-daily trains between Leipzig and Frankfurt at up to 200km/h, with open access for all interested customers. The trains would have capacity for 8 ULDs and be specially adapted for air cargo-style container loading and unloading.

Following successful tests with DHL, ACE hoped to launch "very soon" in 2009, Näther said. He admitted, however, that DHL volumes alone would not be sufficient and "we clearly need other partners". "We are working together with DHL to find other customers and hope to start the train soon," he declared. At a later stage, other airports such as Hamburg, Munich and Düsseldorf could be added.

On a more cautious note, Christian Messerschmidt, managing director of UPS Transport in Germany, highlighted the customer demands on any high-speed rail service for express goods. Services at 200km/h could beat road transit times and be suitable for time-sensitive products as well as deferred deliveries, he pointed out. However, rail services had to be reliable, secure and offer appropriate schedules. UPS supports the concept of rail transport, and is the largest single rail customer in the US, he pointed out. However, the integrator was not "under the same pressure" as FedEx or DHL because of their trucking times to destinations such as Frankfurt or Amsterdam, he said.

One key aspect will be whether centrally-located Cologne Airport decides to build a rail freight station and thus link into the European network, speakers agreed. The airport requires political support in order to invest in the terminal, Kuhla pointed out. Few airports will be able to afford the investment required for the rail freight terminals, added Messerschmidt, implying that public money would be required.