

## Brussels haulage U-turn

### EU favours 60-tonne road 'gigaliners' over rail

Justin Stares - Monday 2 February 2009

THE European Union is about to perform a U-turn in its policy towards road haulage and rail freight.

After years of unsuccessfully trying to move freight off the roads on to rail – the so-called policy of modal shift – the Brussels institutions are close to approving a policy that would shift goods back in the other direction, from rail to road.

Attendees at a European Parliament seminar last week spoke almost unanimously in favour of approving greater use of longer and heavier vehicles, otherwise known as gigaliners.

The European Commission admits that such vehicles would take traffic away from rail. They can carry loads of 60 tonnes as opposed to the 40-tonne limit that applies on international routes.

Seminar attendees heard an official from the commission's directorate-general of transport, John Berry, who said the gigaliner would lead to a "3.8% shift from rail to road" if introduced EU-wide.

This figure could be as high as 11%, he said, and would be felt to a greater degree in central European transit countries such as Germany and Austria.

The trucks, sometimes also known as eco-combis, are expected to create new demand for haulage as well as take market share from the train.

Given the uncertainties and the recession, Mr Berry said the numbers would be "run again" with a view to coming up with a new set of predictions by March and a decision on whether to revise current legislation before the end of the year.

"The figures are uncertain, it is true, but they are the figures we will be using," he said.

Forwarders and shippers, represented by trade associations such as Clecat and the European Shippers' Council, said they favoured gigaliners because they were more efficient and more ecological. The vehicles reduced the carbon footprint of road haulage by 19%, it was claimed.

"Why not use [gigaliners] on selected motorways?" asked Gilbert Gauthier of tyre manufacturer Michelin. "When are we going to be allowed to start experimenting?"

Currently, gigaliners are allowed to haul loads within certain member states, and then, in some cases, on an experimental basis. Today's legislation was "ambivalent", however, said Mr Berry, as there were bilateral agreements allowing the 40-tonne

maximum to be breached. He suggested companies might like to challenge the EU directive in court.

The chairwoman of the debate, Dutch Euro MP Corien Wortmann-Kool, also talked positively about the changes afoot. It was "good to have some figures" on the coming plans, she said.

Both the MEP and the commission official confirmed that the accepted EU policy was no longer modal shift, a change the commission denied having made as recently as last year.

Another Dutchman, Martin Salet, from the Dutch Ministry of Transport, said that his country had sunk billions of euros into its modal shift policy for hardly any return. Even if inland waterways were free the impact on the transport mix in the Netherlands would be negligible, he said.

One of the only seminar attendees prepared to defend modal shift was Community of European Railways executive-director Johannes Ludewig. Approving the gigaliner "makes no sense" without also investing in improved rail productivity, he said. "I remember when the 40-tonne truck was introduced in the early 1980s in Germany. It had a tremendous impact."

The purported carbon footprint savings per unit would be cancelled out over the long term by increased road haulage, he said. "Instead of an aesthetic picture you must look at it in a dynamic way."

Europe's motorways have tripled in length since the 1970s, while rail is struggling with infrastructure that is a century old, Mr Ludewig said.

Railfreight volumes in the EU are largely stable and not far from historic lows.