

Freight Rail & Intermodal

Rail intermodal — the transportation of shipping containers and truck trailers by rail — allows railroads to provide their customers cost-effective, environmentally friendly service for almost anything that can be loaded into a truck or a container.

Customers receive the flexible service that trucks provide, but at a competitive rate only rail intermodal can offer. The public benefits, too, from the reduction in highway congestion and harmful emissions — and from the reduced cost of moving goods to market. Starting with the advent of the modern shipping container in the 1950s, freight railroads have invested heavily to build the world-class intermodal rail network that ensures U.S. global competitiveness:

- New and expanded intermodal terminals at ports and inland use advanced technologies to transfer containers to and from trucks in minutes.
- Additional track capacity and advanced signaling systems allow for faster, more frequent intermodal trains.
- Bridge and tunnel improvements accommodate the additional height that doublestack trains require.
- New locomotives and intermodal flat cars handle traffic growth.

Most importantly, intermodal rail has benefitted rail customers with competitive rates and unmatched efficiency of scale. Thanks in part to intermodal freight rail, average rail rates have fallen 44% since 1981 — allowing most rail shippers to move nearly twice as much freight for the same price paid more than 30 years ago. Freight rail remains committed to maintaining and growing the most cost-effective and efficient intermodal rail network in the world.

- **54 Tons:** Together with trucks and maritime shippers, freight railroads annually carry nearly [54 tons of freight per American](#) — much of it via intermodal rail. Just about everything found on a retailer's shelves might have traveled on an intermodal train, from bananas and beverages to clothing, sporting goods and home appliances.
- **Continued Growth:** In 2019, U.S. rail intermodal volume was 13.7 million units and intermodal accounted for approximately 25% of revenue for major U.S. railroads. This volume is more than any other single commodity group and well ahead of coal, which in the past was usually the largest single source of rail revenue. Intermodal has been the fastest growing major rail traffic segment over the past 25 years and set a new annual volume record in 2018. Around half of rail intermodal volume consists of imports or exports, reflecting the vital role intermodal plays in international trade.

- **25% of Revenue:** In 2019, intermodal accounted for approximately 25% of revenue for major U.S. railroads, more than any other single commodity group and well ahead of coal, which in the past was usually the largest single source of rail revenue.
- **Trade Impacts Intermodal:** Today, [exports](#) and imports account for around half of U.S. rail intermodal traffic. The domestic share of intermodal traffic has been rising in recent years, with much of the increase consisting of freight that use to move solely by truck but which has been converted to rail intermodal.
- **Top U.S. Metro Areas for Intermodal:** Chicago and Los Angeles/Long Beach are by far the top U.S. metropolitan areas for intermodal volume. Major intermodal markets have large populations and extensive highway feeder systems, both of which are crucial elements for intermodal success.