

Press release – 19.8.2022

Capacity bottleneck Rhine valley railway endangers modal shift and supply

"Freight transport needs alternatives on the left bank of the Rhine – we have to act now!"

The completion of the Rhine Valley railway between Karlsruhe and Basel is not expected before 2040-2045. Workable alternative solutions shall be implemented by then.



The contractually agreed extension of the Rhine Valley railway as an element of the NRLA concept is progressing slowly. The upgrade to four-track traffic, 740 metres train length and 2000 tonnes train weight is intended to significantly increase the line capacity and performance.

The Swiss railway industry expressly welcomes the infrastructure upgrade and expects it will be implemented quickly, as this will make a decisive contribution to achieving the modal shift and climate targets.

The current capacity bottlenecks, on the other hand, are noticeably worsening and represent a worrying constant. Construction sites, technical disruptions and insufficient diversion routes are putting such a strain on operations that regular freight transport operations are hardly possible any more, as it was also recently highlighted at the event "Five years after the Rastatt accident: still nothing learned?" (NEE, [link](#)). This has serious consequences on supply and modal shift. Already today, shippers are showing a tendency to shift back to the road, especially for time-sensitive goods.

The Swiss railway industry is therefore calling for targeted measures to safeguard capacity and stabilise operations. The main focus is on the railway line on the left bank of the Rhine, via France. Thanks to the flat route and good presuppositions with regard to its profile, it is an ideal complement and alternative to the Rhine Valley railway, on the right bank, via Germany. During the closure of Rastatt in 2017, it had already become clear that the Alsatian line could be used for the P400 profile thanks to the rapid coding of the Northern section Lauterbourg-Strasbourg and the technical inspection of the Southern section Strasbourg-Basel. Also the upgrade of the line "Gäubahn" between Stuttgart and Singen contributes to traffic decongestion.

Measure No. 1 – Rapid upgrade of the Wörth-Lauterbourg-Strasbourg line

The modernisation of the north-south axis on the left bank of the Rhine is currently one of the most important prerequisites for the stable use of the NRLA and for the further shift of transalpine freight traffic in anticipation of the full upgrade of the route on the right bank of the Rhine.

With the motion [20.3003](#) on the conclusion of an international treaty for the expansion of the line on the left bank of the Rhine and the motion [22.3000](#) on the financing of the electrification of the Wörth-Strasbourg line,

the Swiss parliament has paved the way for Switzerland's active participation in the expansion of the North-South corridor on the French side as well. This will create a parallel diversion route that will put an end to the construction chaos and ensure both transit and import/export traffic, which is important for the Swiss economy.

The Swiss authorities should now press ahead with negotiations with neighbouring countries to achieve electrification and upgrading of the Wörth-Strasbourg line as an alternative route as soon as possible. With relatively little funding, an additional capacity of 60 freight trains per day can be attained within a few years.

Measure no. 2 – Facilitate access to diversion routes via France

Further extensive construction work is planned on the Rhine valley railway, for example in summer 2024 with a four-week total closure. The diversion route on the left bank of the Rhine via France is passable, but only with disproportionately high operational effort and only for a small number of trains per day. In order to avoid a renewed capacity crisis, access to the diversion routes must be facilitated. Temporary solutions should be found so that German-speaking train drivers can travel via France, for example by setting up German-French communication with linguistic apps or bilingual staff at the infrastructure control centres. The procedures for obtaining the necessary line knowledge should also be temporarily simplified.

An internationally coordinated train path management on the left bank of the Rhine is also of central importance. The infrastructure managers involved in Germany, France and Switzerland should draw up a joint catalogue of continuous train paths, in order to let as many freight trains as possible run through this bottleneck in a stable and fluid manner. Capacity can already be noticeably increased by simply lifting the restrictions on night rail traffic.

Measure No. 3 – Corridor renovation Germany: secure diverters first, then build

Rail freight traffic shall be operated without interruption on the main international routes. Therefore, prior to line closures, infrastructure managers must ensure that there are no open construction sites, that the facilities are problem-free and that the necessary equipment (overhead line, train length, storage areas, etc.) is available for all trains using the alternative routes. It is in Switzerland's interest that the general renewal of congested rail corridors, as announced in Germany, includes effective bypass concepts from the very beginning. Before completely renewing the bypass routes, they must be adapted to operational and infrastructure requirements.

Measure No. 4 – Infrastructure managers of the Rhine-Alpine corridor at one table

The challenges in freight transport on the Rhine-Alpine corridor can only be mastered through international cooperation. The coming years of intensive construction activity are crucial in order not to jeopardise the attained success of the modal shift. We propose the establishment of an international working body of the infrastructure managers of the corridor with the involvement of the transport ministries. The aim is an active coordination of the requirements of the infrastructure extension on the one hand and a marketable transport offer on the other. As a central transit country in the Rhine-Alpine corridor, Switzerland is predestined to play a driving role in the implementation of the aforementioned measures. In this way, we will jointly ensure that NRLA meets expectations and that the shift from road to rail can progress continuously.

Profile VAP

The VAP association has been promoting rail freight transport since 1912. With an active transport policy, it works to optimise the political and economic framework conditions, the railway infrastructure and the logistic centres in such a way that rail, as part of the multimodal logistics world, remains a valuable transport solution in the future. This is in the interest of both the environment and the Swiss living and economic space.

VAP represents around 300 companies from the transport and logistic industry in Switzerland and neighbouring countries. They operate 850 sidings and terminals, transshipment facilities, traction vehicles and 45,000 private freight wagons. With its practice-oriented membership and consulting activities, VAP also helps shippers and the logistics industry to minimise the costs of rail freight transport.

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Profile BLS Cargo

BLS Cargo is a corridor operator providing rail freight transport services on the north-south corridor between the North Sea and the Mediterranean. Unaccompanied combined transport services transiting Switzerland, conventional wagonload traffic as well as the rolling highway constitute our key services. In addition, we operate full trainload services within Switzerland as well as Swiss import and export traffics and other routes from Belgium. The BLS Cargo group now employs around 400 staff in four countries - Switzerland, Italy, Germany and Belgium.

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Profile Hupac Group

Hupac is the leading network operator in intermodal transport in Europe. The offer includes 160 trains daily with connections between the major European economic areas and as far as Russia and China. Hupac Ltd was founded in 1967 in Chiasso/Switzerland. The Group consists of 23 companies with locations in Switzerland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Russia and China. Hupac employs 630 collaborators, has over 8,100 wagon modules and operates efficient terminals at important European locations.

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Profile SBB Cargo International

SBB Cargo International runs more than 700 goods train a week from the European North Sea ports to the most important economic hubs in Italy through the Swiss Alps. As the market leader on the north-south axis, the SBB subsidiary thus makes a significant contribution to Switzerland's modal shift policy. SBB Cargo International provides block train services and transports consumer goods, mineral oil, food and chemical products. Its customers include operators and rail freight forwarders from Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. SBB Cargo International employs over 1000 people.

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