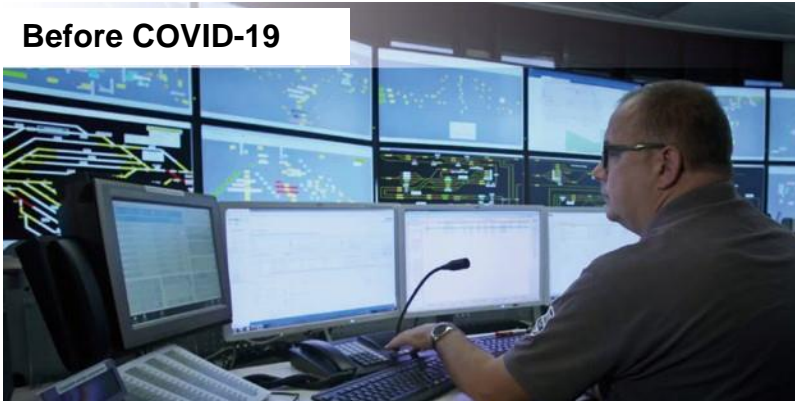


# Corona and rail freight transport

During the coronavirus crisis, rail freight was able to show its strong side and gained a lot of sympathy as a "systemically important" sector. But Corona also means Decline in traffic and loss of revenue.

**DAGMAR REES, EDITOR RAIL BUSINESS**

## Before COVID-19



## During COVID-19



Photo: ZEDAS

Physical distance through cloud application: Hector Rail, together with the software house for its Cargosoftware, moved the control center to the Internet and thus made it home-office capable. The dispatchers were able to work remotely from home within an hour.

We will all remember the middle of March 2020 as the time when everything changed from one day to the next: shops were closed all over Europe, borders were closed, entire branches of industry such as the car industry stopped their production. The trigger was the danger of an exponential spread of the coronavirus and the associated feared collapse of the health system.

The impacts on rail freight traffic were initially mitigated by special transports - because the reintroduction of border controls in many EU countries led to traffic jams of up to 100 km at the borders and the standstill regulations became stricter and stricter, rail freight transport showed its strength: the transport of large quantities, even over long distances, largely without contact, with considerably less personnel than road freight transport and stable routes across the whole of Europe. In addition, due to declining passenger traffic, goods trains tended to arrive more punctually than in "normal" times.

But then a price war broke out in road freight transport and the huge congestion at the borders became shorter because priority lanes for trucks were established - and the slight upswing for rail freight transport was a thing of the past.

The crisis also revealed the weakness of rail freight transport: its lack of flexibility. Although new transports for urgent goods (food or medical goods/ disinfectants) were developed and implemented very quickly, these were isolated cases. They do show what can be achieved when everyone wants new transport by rail and everyone works together to achieve this goal. But they have not yet had a mass effect. All in all, it became clear that there are too few craneable semi-trailers for CT, too few sidings, no electricity on the freight wagons and thus no refrigeration facilities for perishable food or temperature-sensitive pharmaceutical products. The closure of the factories in the car industry also showed once again how strongly the railways depend on the car industry as a customer.

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**Ralf Jentges**  
Lawyer and management consultant

Photo: Lineas



**System relevance:** After the borders have been closed and with 80 to 100 km of lorry traffic jams at the border crossings, rail freight transport keeps the supply going. Lineas honours the heroines and heroes of the crisis with a locomotive that carries everyone's thanks across Europe.

Photo: Rail Cargo

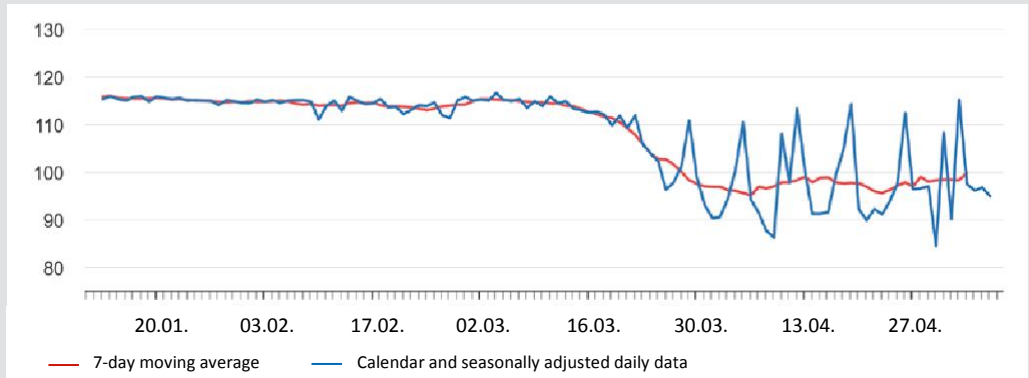


**Sanitary paper:** Due to hoarding purchases, toilet paper can hardly be found in shops for weeks. Rail brings relief, here for example the ÖBB subsidiary Rail Cargo with deliveries for the Austrian hygiene products manufacturer Essity Austria, an additional 280 t per week.

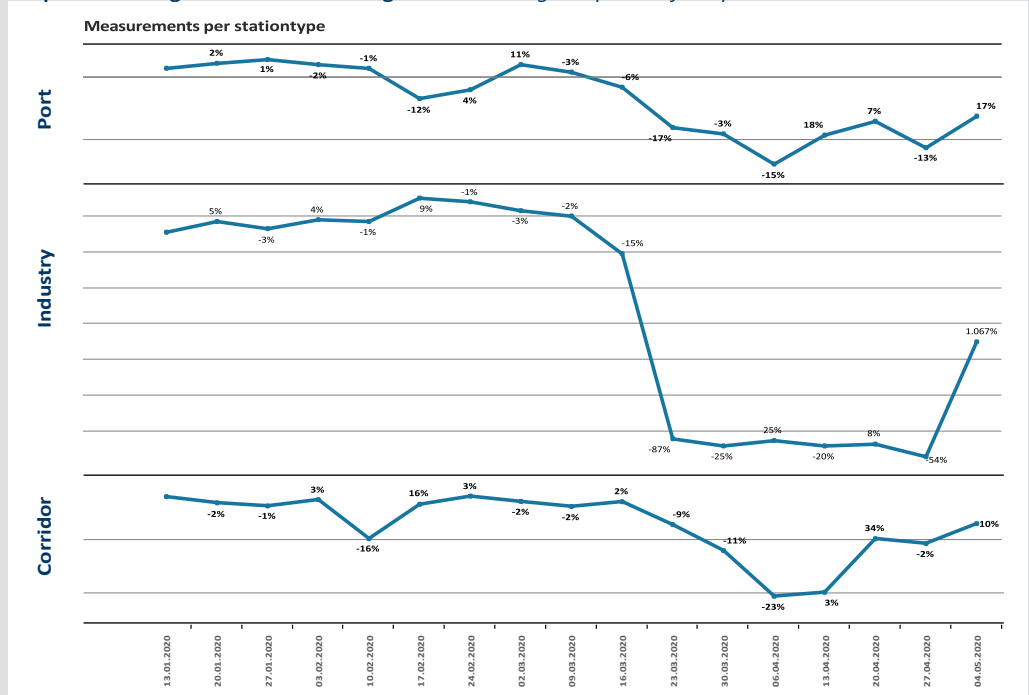
How high the revenue losses for rail freight transport will actually be in 2020 depends decisively on how quickly the economy, and here especially industrial production in Germany, will grow.

and Europe is picking up again. Estimates from individual rail freight operators vary between 20 and 30% loss of turnover, but it is still too early to make reliable forecasts.

Graph 1: The Truck Toll Transport Performance Index



Graph 2: Rail freight traffic at measuring stations - changes in percent from previous week -



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Data and chart 1: Bundesamt für Güterverkehr (BaG)  
Data and chart 2: Rail Watch



Photo: SBB Cargo interna-

**Noodles:** To meet the abrupt increase in demand for noodles to secure stockpiling, freight railways organised pasta trains from Italy, in this case SBB Cargo International for Barilla between Ulm and Parma. DB Cargo, together with DB Schenker, set up a supply chain from Naples to Nuremberg for Aldi-Süd.



Photo: Captrain

**Ethanol for disinfection:** To combat the coronavirus, the demand for alcohol-based disinfectants is increasing. The ethanol needed for production is transported by rail in tank cars through Europe, for example by DB Cargo or, as shown here in the picture, by Captrain.

First data collections show the effects of the coronapandemic crisis on road transport performance and rail freight transport (see graphs 1 and 2). The data in both graphs are based on the digital registration of vehicles.


For road haulage, the Federal Office for Goods Transport (BAG) evaluates the daily mileage of trucks with at least four axles on the federal motorways on the basis of the data transmitted by the toll stations and compiles a truck toll transport performance index (see chart 1), which is also used as an economic indicator. This index fell by 5.8% in March compared to February, and by a further 10.9% in April compared to March.

There are no readily available official statistics in rail freight transport.

Data from Rail Watch can provide an indication of the impact of the Corona crisis (see Figure 2). The company has set up measuring stations with cameras and sensors on railway tracks and scans trains as they pass through.

Originally conceived as wayside monitoring for customers, the data also provide indications of the development of the overall situation in rail freight transport. The different locations of the measuring stations allow a distinction to be made according to the type of traffic (port hinterland or industry). The data that RailWatch Rail Business made available for publication show a crash for industry and declines for port hinterland and on the freight corridors as a whole, as well as an incipient recovery from the beginning of the year.

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