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swissinfo

THE EDITOR HAS LONG PROMOTED SWISSINFO, A SWISS WEBSITE WITH NEWS OF SWITZERLAND IN

ENGLISH, AND MANY OTHER LANGUAGES. RECENTLY SEVERAL INTERESTING ARTICLES ON TRANSPORT HAVE APPEARED TOGETHER WITH A SERIES ABOUT OUTSTANDING SWISS RAILWAY STATIONS. SOME OF THE ARTICLES ARE REPEATED HERE FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE MEMBERS WITH NO INTERNET ACCESS AND TO SHOW THOSE WHO HAVE HOW REWARDING THE SITE CAN BE. THE ARTICLES ALL APPEAR COURTESY OF SWISSINFO AND COPYRIGHT IS THEIRS.

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TAXING TIME FOR TRANSPORT POLICY

While the debate rages about the benefits of joining the EU, Switzerland's self-imposed exclusion seems to have had a positive effect on the environment. In this report comparing Switzerland and Austria, swissinfo finds that the road to Brussels can be a dirty one.

Approaching the Austrian city of Innsbruck from the Brenner Pass, a thick layer of smog hovers over the city, trapped by the high mountain walls on its north and south flanks. The poor air quality is the downside to the stunning alpine setting of the Tyrolean capital, which was twice host to the winter Olympics. "One particle of harmful exhaust emissions is up to nine times as damaging as it is in the plains because there is little exchange of air in the narrow alpine valleys," laments Georg Willi of Tyrol's Green Party. The main cause of the high emissions are the thousands of trucks thundering every day over the Brenner Pass directly south of Innsbruck. "Not only are health costs high, but people living close to the motorway have changed their social behaviour," says Fritz Gurgiser, who heads a citizens' rights group, *Transit Forum*. "Psychologists in Innsbruck did a large study of the effects of living close to the motorway," Gurgiser continues. "It showed that the main losers are children whose school performance worsens. In the long-term, there is an increased risk of cancer."

Alpine routes

The Brenner, Switzerland's Gotthard route and the Mont Blanc and Fréjus tunnels between France and Italy are Europe's key north-south links. However, the Brenner is by far the most popular route. About 1.8 million 40-ton trucks crossed the Alps using the Brenner last year - 400,000 more than in 2003. At the same time, the number of trucks using all Swiss north-south routes is steadily decreasing, with 1.3 million in 2003, a decline of 100,000 compared to 2002.

The reason is two-fold. Austria has been forced to adhere to common European Union policy on motorway tolls, which has led to a sharp drop in prices, while non-member Switzerland has been able to negotiate a deal largely on its own terms, which includes a steady rise in road taxes. The Swiss government is using much of the tax income to finance the construction of two transalpine rail tunnels.

From road to rail

Switzerland's ultimate goal is to transfer all freight from road to rail. It also intends to limit the number of trucks crossing the Swiss Alps to 650,000 annually by 2009. In its latest report on transport, the state government of Tyrol says one-third of all trucks currently

using the Brenner do so to avoid the high Swiss taxes since the route through Switzerland would be shorter. And the population of Tyrol is expected to suffer even more as the Swiss tighten restrictions. The transport office predicts that by 2015 the number of trucks crossing the Brenner will double.

The authorities say despite cleaner engines, the trucks are responsible for two-thirds of the nitrogen oxide emissions choking Innsbruck and other towns in the Inn valley. The emissions were well above permitted levels in 2003.

But the predicted increase in traffic is disputed by Tyrol's main business lobby, the Tyrol Economic Chamber. "We expect a relative reduction in 2005 when Germany introduces a road pricing scheme for heavy vehicles," says the chamber's transport expert, Helmut Lamprecht. He says this will be because of fewer trucks from eastern Europe which first have to cross through Germany on their way south.

Cash cow

Lamprecht also calls the Brenner route "Austria's cash cow" since the road tax is an important source of income for the state. However, Gurgiser of *Transit Forum* says the purported economic benefits are nonsense. "The open roads policy benefits Austria's competition in 95 per cent of the cases." He says European policy encourages the transport of goods by road. "We pay more for a litre of milk produced locally than a litre that has been transported 2,000km. "The transport of goods by road over long distances is artificially sustained by government policy. It's criminal because we pay a high price with the degradation of our environment, the loss of our jobs and health.

"Nobody wants more traffic but the business community argues that if our road taxes are too high, the price of goods will go up," says Georg Willi of the Greens. "So the business lobby and some consumer groups demand low taxes on freight and that's cheaper on the roads than the rails," he explains. "But road freight should be subject to similar restrictions as goods transported by rail, sea or air. "The Swiss have the best system and that should apply to the whole alpine region," he argues. "If Switzerland joined the EU, it would demand that it be allowed to keep its transport policy. That's why we believe Swiss membership is so important because we would expect to be treated as equals."

RAILWAY FAILS TO WIN OVER HEAVY GOODS TRAFFIC

The Swiss government's drive to move alpine traffic off the roads and onto the railway is making slow progress, according to a report. It appears unlikely that a government target to reduce traffic on alpine routes to 650,000 vehicles a year by 2009 will be met.

The report, recently published, found that the number of lorries in transit across the Alps fell by eight per cent between 2000 and 2003. Last year almost 1.3 million trucks crossed the Gotthard, San Bernardino, Simplon and St Bernard passes - a reduction of 100,000 since 2000. The transport ministry said the figures for the first nine months of 2004 confirmed this trend. It added that the reduction was mainly attributable to measures such as the introduction of a special tax for heavy goods vehicles transiting through the Alps.

Long road

But the report - published every two years and presented to parliament - warned that much still needed to be done. "If extra efforts are not agreed upon, the measures taken so far will certainly not be enough to reach the goal set for 2009," the transport ministry said in a statement. It said that future success depended in particular on European cooperation on transferring alpine traffic from road to rail. The statement added that additional measures should be considered, including the introduction of an additional toll for transalpine tunnels.

Alpine Initiative

The Alpine Initiative, which aims to protect Switzerland's mountains from heavy goods vehicles, was enshrined in the Swiss constitution ten years ago. It calls for alpine traffic to be transferred from road to rail and sets specific targets. But critics say there is still a long way to go before the aims of the initiative are fulfilled.

The group, which launched the original campaign to introduce the Alpine Initiative, said the move from road to rail was proceeding too slowly. To reach the annual target of 650,000 vehicles, the number would have to be reduced by ten per cent each year, said the group in a statement. It called on the government to consider alternative ways of reducing the number of lorries in alpine transit.

SBB WINS HERITAGE PRIZE

Swiss Federal Railways has been awarded the prestigious Wakker prize for its exemplary protection of Switzerland's cultural heritage. It is the first time in the award's 33-year history that the prize has gone to a company rather than a local authority.

The Swiss Heritage Society, which awards the Wakker prize, said on Thursday that the Federal Railways, as a public institution, had made commendable efforts in the field of architecture. Its new and old buildings were proof of the company's high standards of architecture and design, said the society in a statement. It singled out the new railway station of Zug in central Switzerland and the newly constructed foot walkways at the stations in the capital, Bern, and Basel as good examples. The signal boxes in Zurich, Basel, as well as the main workshop at Geneva's railway station, were also underlined as landmarks of Switzerland's architectural design. (*Zug Bhf was pictured in the December Swiss Express*).

The society also praised infrastructure features, including bridges, tunnels and rail tracks, as important elements of the country's cultural heritage. And it said it was impressed by the Federal Railways' commitment to maintaining its historic buildings, which date back more than a century.

The company said it was very pleased with the award. "For a modern transport company which still uses some of its old buildings, this prize is a real achievement" Federal Railways spokesman Jean-Lous Scherz told *swissinfo*. He added that the company would invest the SFr20,000 (£9000) prize money in cultural heritage projects. The award will be handed over at a public ceremony in Zurich on June 4. Previous winners of the Wakker prize include more than 30 towns and cities across Switzerland.

Finally, being Switzerland the major Timetable change in December was reported in full!

RAILWAYS' NEW TIMETABLE GETS SMOOTH LAUNCH

The railways celebrated its launch at three a.m. at Zürich station, which has gone into service without a hitch and only a few late trains. The first train pulled out of Bern station shortly after four a.m., carrying a large number of railway enthusiasts.

The head of the federal railways, Benedikt Weibel, said on Sunday he was relieved that the launch of new timetable, part of the Rail 2000 programme, had gone ahead smoothly. Around 90 per cent of train departure times have been modified. Hundreds of railway employees had been standing by to deal with any problems that may have cropped up. Weibel warned however that the railways faced a bigger challenge on Monday, when commuters head to work, and on Tuesday, when freight traffic picks up.

Potential problems

The railways expect some problems on regional lines where there is only one track.

Commuters will also have less time to switch trains at some stations. Weibel said that there are around 100 incidents every day on the rail network. "Most of them are caused by external factors or happen because of infrastructure problems," he added.

Some trains were late on Sunday morning, but the railways said that the delays were not related to the introduction of the new timetable. According to the head of the railways, the likelihood of an incident happening has increased along with the number of trains running on the network. Weibel says his biggest fear is a breakdown of the company's showcase track between Mattstetten, north of Bern, and Rothrist near Olten. Trains are running at speeds of 160 kilometres per hour on this 45-kilometre section. Weibel says an incident is likely to happen some time in the future.

Regional improvements

Ceremonies marked the launch of the new national timetable on Saturday in central Switzerland, just hours before it became effective. Cantons Glarus, Luzern and Zug are among the first to benefit from the revamping of the railways' operations. Swiss president Joseph Deiss inaugurated the new Glarus Sprinter with Weibel on Saturday. The new express train will link the canton with Zürich. Glarus is the last cantonal capital to benefit from a high-speed connection to the rest of the country, a hurdle the local authorities have been trying to overcome for years.

The railways have also upgraded their services around Luzern and Zug. Regional trains are to run more frequently, putting the suburbs and areas lying further away within easier reach. Nine stations have also been built in the Zug area, while four more have been put into service in and around Luzern.

TIMETABLE SUCCESS

Swiss Federal Railways says the launch of a faster and more frequent passenger service one month ago has been largely a success.

Since the introduction of the new timetable in December, there have been 12 per cent more trains in service, but drivers have complained about the workload.

The improved and extended service introduced on December 12 was the largest restructuring undertaken by the Federal Railways in decades. It has seen the introduction of connections every half hour between major urban centres. "The new timetable has withstood the test, proving its functionality," said Roland Binz, spokesman for the network, on Wednesday. "More than half the rail connections have improved."

Binz added, however, that the company had received many complaints from passengers reliant on the 14 per cent of lines where connections are worse than before the changeover.

High volume

Binz said there had been several minor hitches during the first few weeks. Several stations provided wrong information, and an extremely high passenger volume on some lines meant additional carriages had been needed. Unions said the increased service had put train drivers under increased pressure.

The Federal Railways said the delivery of rail freight within the country had remained punctual despite the increase in passenger trains on the Swiss network. However, Binz said there were many delays with cross-border freight, which the company put down to the expansion of its cargo service. He said five times as many freight trains belonging to the Federal Railways were now travelling each week between Switzerland and Italy, with four times as many running between Switzerland and Germany.