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BLS CARGO – A SUCCESS STORY

Ron Smith



485 017 & 485 015 BLS enter Basel Bad Bhf, 10.09.08

ALL PHOTOS: Ron Smith

BLS Cargo is a remarkable success story. The parent company BLS AG transports around 45m passengers a year on their trains, buses and lake ships. In 2001 its cargo division was separated into BLS Cargo AG. It was correctly foreseen that the future for freight needed to be international, with partners to give the scale, network and volumes to make rail attractive, and this would need a separate undertaking. In 2002 shares were made available, and Railion Deutschland AG (DB) took 20% of the company, 2.3% is owned by IMT AG (the Italian Ambrogio Group) with BLS AG owning the remaining 77.7%. On 25th June 2008, Railion Deutschland GmbH increased their shareholding to 45%, after regulatory authority approval, and this was back-dated to 1st January 2008.

To increase the scale of operations, BLS Cargo Deutschland GmbH was opened in Weil am Rhein in December 2007 with just some seven staff, whilst another subsidiary BLS Cargo Italia S.r.l opened in Chiasso in

December 2006. With these subsidiaries, BLS takes care of cross-border transfers on the Rotterdam – Betuweroute – Germany – Switzerland – Italy axis. In 2007 the Italian company employing only 20 people, despatched 13,576 trains and made a profit.

When the Lötschberg base tunnel opened in June 2007, the BLS group ran the first trains through it (all ETCS Level 2 equipped) and by the end of the year 3,700 of their freight trains had passed through the tunnel. It is remarkable that the base tunnel has a train capacity of 110 trains per day, and already 108 trains are using it on some days. In addition to running 61% of the freight trains on the Lötschberg route BLS Cargo now runs 22% of the freight trains on the Gotthard line.

The growth at BLS Cargo has been dramatic. From 488 million net tonne kilometres (mntk) over the Lötschberg and 92 mntk over the Gotthard in 2001 to no less than 1942 mntk using the Lötschberg and 1305 mntk using the Gotthard in

2007. In the first six months of 2008, total traffic was 15% up on the previous year's same period - 2% up on the Lötschberg and 30% on the Gotthard. The turnover of BLS Cargo in 2007 was CHF191.7m producing a net profit of CHF14.9m. All this was achieved with a punctuality record that would be the envy of many railways, 81% of trains arrived within 30 minutes of booked time.

BLS Cargo trains are varied, including unaccompanied intermodal, bulk train load, wagon load and rolling highway. This is operated by the dedicated company RAlpin between Freiberg in Brisgau, Germany, and Novara, Italy. In 2007 over 5,000 such trains were run, with a record load factor of 91.5%. Capacity will be increased in 2008/09 to cope with demand. The involvement with the Ambrogio group has been fruitful with over 1,000 dedicated trains run in 2007, covering 203.5 mntk. Wagonload traffic is important too. Railion Deutschland had opened "Railport" terminals in Germany and Northern Italy, where loads can be consolidated and wagon

load traffic retained and developed. In 2007 BLS Cargo took over the operation of Railport trains through Switzerland. Other developments included operating in France and Austria, using national operators in those countries as partners.

To cope with this traffic BLS Cargo is introducing more multi - system locomotives. The BLS Cargo Re485 locos and Railion's BR185 locos work indiscriminately across the German/Swiss border, and this experience has encouraged BLS Cargo to order more locos that will also be equipped to operate in Italy and Austria. Bombardier is to deliver 10 Re486 locomotives in 2008. These will be equipped with ETCS level 11, and be capable of operating in multiple with the existing Re485 and BR185 locomotives.

The biggest movement of goods in the EU is between Rotterdam and Milan/Genoa, where rail traffic along this corridor is expected to grow 86% by 2020. It was these long-term forecasts that encouraged the Swiss to build the Lötschberg base tunnel as this level of traffic moving by road through their fragile alpine environment

Locos 166 & 182 on an oil train in Biel station, 03.09.08.





Locos 182 and 172 at Basel Bad Bf, 10.09.08.

would be unacceptable. In 1999, the Lötschberg tunnel route saw 6,616 million gross tonnes pass. By 2007 this flow had risen by 358% to 23,663 million gross tonnes, with the record for one day being on the 29th October 2007 when 98,224 tonnes in 86 freight trains used the route. Eight years ago, when the base tunnel was started, there were fears that the mountain section would then be redundant and closed. It can be seen that this is now far from the case. The operational attractiveness

of the Lötschberg rail route has seen such a sharp growth in traffic that BLS Cargo are pressing for more capacity to be made available just 18 months after the base tunnel opened.

BLS Cargo and BLS AG do not operate totally separately - it makes sense that locomotives and crews are interchangeable. This makes for better utilisation of resources, and provides more interest for the 600 train crew personnel. Of the 2,632 people who worked for the BLS Group at

465 011-5 with its train of lorries at Basel Bad Bf, 10.09.08





At Basel Bad Bhf, 465 013-1 is also keeping freight off the roads, 10.09.08.

the start of 2008, just 76 worked directly for BLS Cargo although this had risen to 137 by 30th June 2008.

BLS Cargo has very successfully grown from a subsidiary of a regional Swiss operator, to capitalise on the opportunity that the new Lötschberg tunnel has created, including forging partnerships across frontiers and setting up subsidiaries. This has enabled it to offer the “One Stop Shop” and frontier-free network that international trade demands. By eliminating the hiatus at

borders, and utilising the distinct advantages of the new Betuweroute in the Netherlands and the Lötschberg tunnel, it can offer transits that cannot be beaten by road, and it is achieving the economies of scale by running so many fully loaded trains that the economic offer is unbeatable.

BLS Cargo is now operating in many European countries and has strong plans in place to maintain the momentum of the growth well into the future.

Showing the busy freight scene at Basel Bad Bhf, 485 006 & 485 004 pass with their train, 10.09.08.

