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SBB CARGO EXPANDS

Ron Smith



482 003-1 hauls tanks at Basel Bad Bhf, 10/09/2008.

PHOTO: Ron Smith

SBB - going beyond its frontiers.

Switzerland, lying between Germany and Italy, is in the middle of the largest freight traffic flow in Europe so has always held a special place in the trans-alpine traffic. The Swiss people and their government have repeatedly confirmed their support for carrying as much of this traffic by rail as possible, with 66% of transit traffic now by rail, compared to 25% in both France and Austria. SBB's freight subsidiary SBB Cargo is a major player in this market.

Swiss internal traffic relies heavily on wagon-load. This type of traffic has proved difficult for countries such as France and the UK, where it has virtually disappeared, but SBB Cargo's internal division is developing it and prior to the current economic downturn were making it a great success. With around 3,500 customers on 323 serviced destinations, using some 3,000 private sidings, and despatching 3,250 wagons per day for an average distance of 120 kms, SBB Cargo has 2,100 of its staff working on national freight traffic, producing revenue of CHF442m in 2007. This traffic is highly vulnerable to road competition, and also to the other rail operators in Switzerland, which has one of the most open markets in Europe. The major competitor is the freight arm of the BLS, today partially owned by the DB Schenker. To remain competitive and profitable, SBB Cargo is reinvigorating

its offer to grow wagon-load. The key to success is quality – that means delivering on time every time, at the right price, with no damages, and retaining flexibility to cope with the problems that will always occur from time to time. To increase their attractiveness, SBB Cargo is seeking partnerships with other transport operators to enhance the range and scope of services, and to grow the volume. Volume is critical to wagon-load services - only when sufficient individual wagons make up a full train is rail at its competitive advantage. National full-train-load traffic is also doing well, operating in sectors such as construction, petro-chemical, and even the seasonal sugar beet traffic.

Co-operation with other operators is also seen as the way forward with International full-train-load traffic. SBB Cargo sees a consolidation in the rail freight market over the next few years, with fewer players offering a complete international service. Europe is expanding, the flow of goods grows constantly from ports such as Hamburg, Antwerp, Rotterdam, etc to the hinterland, and domestic EU traffic flows are tilting from the traditional N-S axis to growing east – west flows, thanks to manufacturing sites in Poland, the Czech Republic and (non-EU) Turkey sending goods to Western European markets. SBB Cargo is facing up to this by expanding its

operations far beyond its borders, so SBB Cargo locomotives can be seen in Hamburg, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, or in northern Italy. Technically this has meant locomotives that can work on different voltages, different signalling systems and drivers who can operate these locos and use various languages. These challenges have been met, as has the loss of a CHF16.9m subsidy that SBB Cargo received in 2007. Despite this, the first quarter results for 2008 showed a loss of CHF8.2m, compared to a loss of CHF35.5m in 2007 – a creditable achievement in the economic climate. Traffic was actually down, from 6,827 million tonne kilometres in 2007 to 6,600 in the same first quarter of 2008. The keys to success are the same as for internal traffic; reliability, speed and costs. Traditionally the delays and unreliability have occurred at borders; now these difficulties have been largely eliminated thanks to great efforts from the different networks to ensure that the borders effectively disappear. One point of contact, one piece of paper, one invoice, have made it easier to do business with rail, and the multi-function locos and revised operating practices mean that trains now compete and beat road for transit times over longer distances.

To face up to the growing internationalisation, SBB Cargo needs partnerships. It already works closely with BLS, DB, FS, and has recently signed a major new contract to work with TRW a Belgian logistics operator. This co-operation will continue and expand as the international flow of goods continues to grow. The crucial year will be 2009, when all the measures taken to improve the business should come into effect.

1. Hupac Cargo locomotive 482012-9.

2. An SBB loco waits in a Hamburg yard, a long way from home, 01/09/2007.

3. 482037-9 on train at Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 30/08/07.

4. SBB, 843 065 at Solothurn.

PHOTO: Mark Barber

