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SWITZERLAND AND TRANS-EUROPEAN FREIGHT OPERATIONS

Der Beobachter

For Switzerland, adoption of EU law for the rail network is obvious as its main lines sit in the middle of Europe and many trains are to-and-from somewhere else. However, although much EU legislation on railways is binding on member states, not many have yet implemented it in national legislation and legal proceedings for non-compliance have been initiated on several member states. The Swiss Confederation, although not required to, has already largely adopted EU open-access legislation and public purchasing rules. Standing at Olten or Erstfeld you see the results all day long. In October 2010 the EU announced its intention to increase on-rail competition further; for example by standardising open tendering rules for new rail service contracts.

Switzerland does not have a completely independent track authority as EU law demands of its member states; however the admission of open-access freight operators has been uncontroversial so far with no evidence of abuse of competitive situations. The Bundesamt für Verkehr (BAV)

supervises the way in which SBB Infrastructure allocates track capacity on SBB and BLS for competing companies. This is an unusual situation that will continue under the Oct. 2010 announcement for good reasons. One is that the present arrangement seems to work better than elsewhere. Track access rules and charges are seen by competitors to be fair. Another is that as we saw with the new Bombardier Intercity trains, integrated development of track and trains is much more cost-effective than trying to get each right separately. Yet another is that much of the capacity is taken by the Taktfahrplan, both nationally and locally with dense S-Bahn services voted and paid for by the electorate. Often some infrastructure work has been expressly voted and paid for by a local electorate so that given passenger services can operate which then has contractual precedence on the system. The Federal Council has now ordered further proposals to be drawn up by 2012 for clearer legal separation of track and operations. These new proposals include adoption of the EU rules for rail interoperability, also now binding on member



Crossrail 186 903 and a companion loco haul a southbound freight up the 1 in 66 gradient into Mülenen (BE) as they head towards the Lötschberg tunnel on the 28th October 2009. These are identical engines to the BLS Cargo Class 486.

PHOTOS: Der Beobachter

states. These form by far the most important step to facilitating international rail competition and shared efficiency gains, because they provide a basis for harmonization of equipment and its acceptance, and, more important still, safety, procedures and information, to allow uninhibited inter-running. Much has been done already, because Switzerland can only be heard in the EU if it has a position of strength, achieved by demonstrated compliance. Moreover, its own operators compete successfully on various EU national networks already. This has something of beating them and joining them.

Within Switzerland a high standard of punctual operation, and the strict Taktfahrplan, may even assure more freight train capacity, because the windows for access slots are defined repetitively every hour and can be intensively used, but things are never as perfect as that. It is getting more difficult to fit everything in, especially when things do not always go to schedule. I learnt of an 'open access' oil-tank block train coming to a stand on the climb from Stein-Säckingen to the Bözberg Tunnel on the Basel – Brugg line, therefore bringing everything to a halt whilst it awaited an assisting engine from Muttenz yard 30km back. This, with modern locomotives and scientific testing and rating, seemed unusual. The gradient is 7km at 1 in 83 from Stein-Säckingen to Frick where it levels out through the station before steepening to 1 in 71 for the next 9km to Effingen. The Bözberg route is steep (similar to Shap Bank in England), was expensive to build, and only opened quite late in 1875 as a direct line to Brugg for Zürich. However, it is now very busy with freights, many from competing rail freight companies, heading to the Gotthard via Brugg & Rotkreuz. Observing the situation at Frick, after a Zürich train departed the station starter signal cleared to yellow, and soon to green, indicating a train following 'on the

block' up the hill - but nothing happened. Ten minutes later a noise like a jammed vacuum cleaner, an aggrieved electrical howl, announced the arrival of BLS 486 508, with a heavy Geest intermodal train, appearing at walking pace under the road bridge. It accelerated on the level, and set off hopefully up the 1 in 71, slowing visibly in the following horseshoe curve. Getting over the top was going to be a close-run thing and the timetable was already at risk. Apparently this is happening more and more, especially with the private operators who do not always have an expensive 'hot spare' engine waiting in the yard in Muttenz to reinforce a heavy load heading south from Germany. Playing havoc with the timetable in this manner can cause heavy penalty payments, but far worse is that the lost paths do not come back; what in Switzerland is called Timetable Stability is the capacity for re-absorbing delays and getting back to normal, and there is a limit to what can be done. 

BLS Cargo 486 508, a TRAAX multi-voltage engine, crawls at walking pace through the rain into Frick (AG) with a very heavy intermodal freight on 5th October 2010.

