

Modal shift in Alpine transit Switzerland

Combined transport needs alternative routes via France

9.9.2024 - During the full closure of the Rhine Valley railway during the holiday month of August, the diesel shuttle on the route on the left bank of the Rhine performed well. The initiative shows that in order to ensure the stability and reliability of combined transport on the north-south axis in the long term, it is necessary to expand the railway lines on the left bank of the Rhine in France.

Successful diesel shuttle on the left bank of the Rhine

Around 20 freight trains per day and direction through Alsace – this is the number of train journeys that could be offered during the full closure of the Rhine Valley railway in August 2024. This was made possible by setting up a shuttle service with diesel locomotives on the non-electrified Wörth-Lauterbourg-Strasbourg-Offenburg line. “A ground-breaking concept, which overcame numerous technical and administrative hurdles thanks to a committed Franco-German-Swiss cooperation,” says Hupac CEO Michail Stahlhut, commenting on the project. “Thanks to this initiative, we were able to prevent a collapse in industrial supply, as we experienced with the accident in Rastatt in 2017.”

For Hupac's combined transport operations, the result of the three-week closure was positive. The holiday-related low volume of traffic was largely handled via the 4-metre corridor via Alsace and via the Gäubahn with a reduced profile. The weak point of the diversion via France proved to be the low capacity at the transfer points, which led to congestion in the event of traffic disruptions. In addition, the diversion route reached its capacity limit towards the end of the month as volumes increased.

Overall, however, the importance of the diversion via France cannot be overestimated. The project initiators - SBB Cargo International, Captrain France, DB InfraGo and SNCF Réseau - invested almost three years in the conception and preparation of the project. Together they were able to find market-oriented solutions and prevent a shift back to road. “Now we have to build on this pioneering achievement and include the French access routes to the NEAT in the Swiss modal shift policy. The upgrading of the NEAT feeder line Belgium-Metz-Strasbourg-Basel to the 4-metre corridor is a top priority”, says Hans-Jörg Bertschi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Hupac.

Further modal shift in Alpine transit only possible with a 4-metre corridor on the left bank of the Rhine

The modal shift of transalpine traffic to rail has been in a standstill for several years. “The limited capacity of the German rail network is responsible for this stagnation in Switzerland's modal shift policy. This is the bottleneck of the current NEAT system,” says Bertschi. The planned corridor renovations in Germany, involving the closure of main lines for several months, will aggravate the situation until after 2030.

A further shift of Alpine transit traffic through Switzerland to the railways therefore presupposes that the Belgium-Metz-Strasbourg-Basel axis on the left bank of the Rhine is upgraded to the 4-metre corridor. Traffic from Belgium and the southern Netherlands, which currently travels through Germany, could then take the 110 km shorter route through France. “In view of the decades-long backlog in the development of the rail axis on the right bank of the Rhine, increasing traffic via France is the only option to prevent stagnation or even a reversal in the modal shift policy,” stresses Bertschi. It is in the interest of Swiss transport policy to initiate the necessary expansion of the corresponding tunnel profiles through the Vosges mountains with targeted investment subsidies in France, as has been successfully achieved in Italy.

A motion to this effect by the National Council's Transport Committee was passed by the National Council in June 2024 and will be discussed by the Council of States in September.

Traffic through France planned from 2025

The positive experience with the diversion traffic through Alsace is motivating Hupac to strategically expand transport on the routes on the left bank of the Rhine. "From 2025 we are planning container transit trains with a suitable profile via France, even if this is not yet possible with 4-metre semi-trailers and involves additional costs," announces Michail Stahlhut. Hupac is thus creating an alternative to the tense situation in Germany, where corridor renovations with complete closures for months are putting a considerable strain on capacities. "We are delighted that SBB Cargo International is proactively supporting efforts to eliminate bottlenecks in the NEAT system by founding a subsidiary in France," says Hans-Jörg Bertschi. The development of new services on the left bank of the Rhine through France is also an important signal to SNCF Réseau with regard to the necessary extensions to the tunnel profile.

Traffic development in the first half of the year

After the negative development of the previous year, traffic volumes on the Hupac Group's network have stabilised. A slight increase of 0.4% was recorded in transalpine traffic through Switzerland in the first six months of the year. The traffic losses due to the closure of Rastatt were moderate and did not have a significant impact on the result. The Hupac Group transported a total of 494,000 road consignments in the first half of the year, which corresponds to a decline of 2.8% compared to the previous year. Maritime hinterland traffic in Germany and transalpine traffic via Austria and France developed negatively. "The transport results are in line with our expectations," says Stahlhut. "We assume that we will be able to maintain a stable level in the coming months and even grow in some areas, for example in the Benelux market."

Profile of the Hupac Group

Hupac is Europe's leading intermodal network operator with a transport volume of around 1 million road consignments per year. The offer comprises 130 trains per day with connections between the most important economic areas, thus making an important contribution to the modal shift to rail and to environmental protection.

Hupac was founded in 1967 in Chiasso/Switzerland. The Group consists of 24 companies with locations in Switzerland, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Poland, Russia and China. Hupac counts 700 employees on a full-time basis, holds over 8,500 rail platforms and operates 12 terminals at major European hubs.

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