

Transport

Rail sector continues crusade against gigaliners

By Isabelle Smets | Monday 13 January 2014

MEPs and the Council of Ministers are soon expected to come to a decision on the review of Directive 96/53/EC, which sets provisions for the weight and dimensions of trucks allowed to circulate within the EU. They must also decide on whether to allow the cross-border circulation of gigaliners – that can weigh up to 60 tonnes and measure up to 25 metres – that the European Commission would like to authorise between countries already allowing gigaliners in their own territory. It is a touchy subject for the rail sector since it feels that giving these vehicles more leeway on the road would inevitably lead to an already sub-par rail freight being overshadowed by the road.

It is therefore no coincidence that, one month before the vote at the Committee on Transport (TRAN), which should take place on 11 February, a new document on the expected effects of the cross-border authorisation of gigaliners has surfaced. The paper, drafted by the railway sector, is a clear bid to convince European decision makers not to pay heed the Commission's proposal. The rail sector refers back to various conclusions from anti-gigaliner studies in terms of modal transport, road safety, CO₂ emissions – one of the key pro-gigaliner arguments, which stresses that two gigaliners are equal to three regular trucks – and the cost of adapting infrastructures. The document argues that single wagonload rail freight would be affected worst, due to its high share of fixed costs, with up to 35% of rail freight shifting back to road. It says that combined rail-road transport would lose significant market share as well, with up to 13% of rail freight shifting back to road.

The rail sector believes that the development of combined rail-road transport, which increased by around 29% between 2005 and 2011, is the most promising for the sector over the next few years but that this market could be jeopardised by gigaliners. This would contradict the political objectives of the Commission's 2011 transport white paper, according to which 30% of medium and long-distance freights should be shifted from the road to rail and inland waterways by 2030.

To recall, MEPs are divided on whether or not to authorise cross-border traffic for gigaliners (rapporteur Jörg Leichtfried, S&D Austria is against it). The Council has still not discussed the issue despite the fact that the proposal dates back to April 2013. The dossier is on the Greek EU Presidency's calendar seeing as Athens hopes that the Council can agree on a general approach by June. Failing that, a political debate at the very least lies ahead.

The document is available at www.europolitics.info > Search = 348650

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