

Transalpine capacity

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TRANSALPINE CAPACITY



LEFT: Until the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel, these are the transport options on this alpine corridor – rail through the existing tunnel, the new motorway road on stilts or the old road for the adventurous driver.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

Last October a group of Swiss transportation organizations concerned about future transalpine operations, and fronted by HUPAC, held a news conference in Zürich. Along with the associated briefing documents that were issued on the day this was an effort to highlight to the press, public and politicians some critical issues linked with realising the long-term objectives of the nation's NEAT policies. The theme of the discussion and the documents was that it was simply no use building the Lötschberg and Gotthard Base tunnels in an effort to switch heavy goods vehicles and through freight from road to rail as there were a lot more rail infrastructure improvements needed to make the policies work.

The two main issues revolved around the capacity of the new tunnels and the need to ensure adequate clearances were available on rail routes through Switzerland, to enable the carriage of 4m high trucks and trailers on through transalpine services. These profile clearances need to be in place before the 2017 opening to traffic of the Gotthard Base Tunnel. The road haulage industry is conscious of the potential that will exist for streamlining their operations by putting semi-trailers (or whole trucks) on corridor trains, but it is pointed out that this wholesale movement from road to rail is currently under question due to the lack of investment on the tunnel approach routes. It was always known that the approach lines to the Gotthard were not adequate for this need, and the rail operators have been planning works for some time. However, the recent political squeezing of costs has meant that timely improvement of these, generally SBB, approach lines to the Gotthard had been left aside.

The new Lötschberg Base Tunnel (and its approaches on BLS routes) does have full 4m clearances, but the tunnel is hamstrung by its single track sections, so this route is therefore already at its capacity limits. It is understood that to complete the missing links in the Base Tunnel to improve the capacity would cost some CHF800m, and there are no funds allocated for this. The growth of transit freight on this

corridor means that increasing numbers of less height-critical services have to take the 'over-the-top' route through the old tunnel, a diversion that costs time and money. Interestingly the VöV (the Swiss public passenger transport operators association) has introduced a new issue regarding line capacities on the transalpine routes. The recasting of the national timetable to take advantage of the shorter trip times made possible by the Lötschberg Base Tunnel has resulted in generating a boom in passenger traffic on this corridor. To strengthen the passenger schedules, as may soon be necessary, will mean further competition for paths with the freight sector on what is now an overcrowded route. Double-deck passenger trains would be the answer on this line but, (as is anticipated), were a similar passenger boom to happen once the Gotthard Base Tunnel opens the introduction of double-deck stock would not be an option as the Gotthard approach lines are not cleared for these either.

The cost of the necessary Gotthard route clearances is estimated at some CHF600m, small in relation to the overall project costs, but this is not currently budgeted-for and action regarding these improvements is now becoming urgent. The works should achieve: clearances for 4m semitrailers on piggyback trains; clearance for the new generation of double-deck passenger trains; increases in the lengths of sidings and loops to at least 650m; plus associated signalling work. In addition in Italy there needs to be serious improvement of the Luino line, which is still single track, and the provision of additional terminal facilities in the Milano area. All this also assumes that the new Monte Ceneri tunnel in Ticino will be completed in time. In SE 104 we ran an item which indicated that the SBB was looking at options for downsizing the existing Gotthard route post-2017. Given the scenarios outlined above this thinking would seem to be premature, for if the Lötschberg is anything to go-by, this transalpine corridor will need all the capacity it can get as we move into the middle of this century. 