

Exploring new roads

Whether it's due to stronger yields at a given airport, forwarder-driven demand or carrier network expansion, trucking services are seeing significant developments all over the world. However, despite ongoing innovation, hauliers are still facing low margins, reports Ian Putzger.

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Trucks have always been a common sight in Columbus, Ohio, but the city Rickenbacker Airport is now seeing rather a lot of them carrying air cargo. Two developments are converging to turn it into a hub for road feeder services (RFS).

One factor concerns Cathay Pacific attempting to establish the airport as a stop for scheduled services. Thanks to the proximity of large textile importers, Rickenbacker has seen a good number of cargo charters from Asia over the years. These were often Boeing 747 freighters of US operators carrying supplies to troops in the Middle East or Afghanistan, then stopping in Hong Kong to load up for the return flight to North America. As US military charter work has dwindled drastically, Cathay spotted a gap for a regular operation and now runs three cargo flights per week through Rickenbacker, which it combines with New York.

"We are looking to build Rickenbacker as another gateway," says James Woodrow, director of cargo at Cathay. He sees good opportunities to develop a trucking network around the airport. Cargo from Pittsburgh, for instance, can be fed to Rickenbacker rather than trucked to Chicago, he notes.

The second driver of Rickenbacker's RFS traffic is the establishment of a hub at the airport by US cargo airline Amerijet. As with Cathay, the carrier sensed a gap in the US market and commenced Boeing 767F flights between Rickenbacker and Reno in July this year. Both airports act as hubs for trucking networks in their respective regions. While the western network has spokes to Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Phoenix, Rickenbacker is the focal point for trucks serving Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Newark and Atlanta. In addition, there are three weekly truck runs connecting the eastern network to Miami.

RFS is on the upswing in other key markets too. On the other side of the Atlantic, Wallenborn has had a busy year, registering 'significant growth' both inbound and outbound at major European gateways, reports Jason Breakwell, manager of development and key accounts. "There is more demand for RFS and I believe this will continue," he adds.

This marked growth in traffic can especially be seen in Frankfurt and Amsterdam, Breakwell observes. Smaller European gateways such as Stockholm or Milan seem to be attracting fewer freighter operators, but even London, Paris and Brussels appear to be losing out to the rival hubs in Germany and the Netherlands, he says.

RFS activity is also up in China. In the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong Air Cargo Industry Services (HACIS), the logistics arm of handling firm HACTL, has stepped up its trucking activities and registered double-digit growth in some segments. Besides services targeting specific market sectors, it launched an offering that delivers pre-built units to Shenzhen airport to facilitate transits via Hong Kong to China

The company's RFS activities surged 33% in the first half of this year, reports managing director Vivien Lau, who is also HACTL's executive director. Of the six points in China that HACIS serves, Dongguan showed the strongest growth, with an increase of 98%

Lau notes that the planned bridge linking Hong Kong with Macau and Zhuhai, which is scheduled to open in 2016, will pave the way for HACIS to expand its network even further; although it is too early to predict how the bridge will impact cargo routed through Hong Kong and Macau.

Shanghai, handling firm Pudong Air Cargo Terminals Ltd (PACTL) has been running RFS services to 36 stations in China, going as far afield as Urumqi in the Xinjiang province. For the most part these services are *ad hoc*, but nine destinations have scheduled truck links, including Nanjing, Qingdao, Hangzhou and Suzhou. Trucks are given flight numbers and equipped with GPS.