

Maritime consultant Dave Watts explains the myriad of problems bedevilling loading activities as peak citrus season approaches

Durban Harbour: “At the moment it seems pretty awful”

The South African citrus industry has been very frank in its concern at how the season is progressing at Durban port – again. A planned strike by labour unions at various ports was yesterday averted by a court interdict obtained by the Transnet National Ports Authority.

Cold store owners are at their wits' end at cold storage congestion. Exasperated truck drivers are forced to wait in line for up to ten hours to offload and went on strike two weeks ago, while all types of cargo blockaded the terminal entrance.

As ships are forced to wait outside the harbour and stack dates are missed, some shipping lines have been obliged to make last-minute rescheduling plans.

FreshPlaza has been told of a number of vessels that have been forced to skip Port Elizabeth Harbour in order to keep to their schedules, as well as other ships that have decided to bypass Durban and rather make for the newly refurbished Walvis Bay Harbour in Namibia.

The South African citrus industry has noted with concern that productivity at the Durban harbour is at its lowest in years which is the culmination of many factors.

FreshPlaza discussed the situation at the harbour with Dave Watts, maritime consultant and CGA shipping adviser during the citrus peak season.

“At the end of the day all of the issues pertain to management,” Dave states. “The current ship-to shore rates are a result of a number of things: poor human relations between port authorities and labour, which is not helped by aggressive

unions. They can go on a go-slow to get what they want. The average ship-to-shore container rate is now 19 or 20 a day. At a decent overseas port you probably get double that for container moves out of the ship onto the ground."

"The ship-to-shore rates are abysmal at the moment. Maybe this happens at crane level, maybe at the quayside, because everything's got to be coordinated."

Maintenance in arrears and high staff turnover

The next reason that immediately springs to mind, Dave continues, is ground handling management. "You might have containers just not being picked up quickly and that could be a management issue, or the way the yards have been set out and the way they work in the yard."

There has been more wind than normal recently and once wind speeds reach 60 or 70 km/h, everything comes to a standstill. (At the moment wind conditions at Durban harbour are not troublesome.)

Furthermore, Dave points to general management and relationship issues at the harbour. "Too many changes in staff, it's almost like a roundabout there with the very high turnover in staff with some appointed to positions they're not really equipped to handle."

Maintenance of equipment like straddle carriers, rubber-tyred gantries (RTGs), haulers, is just not up to scratch. At container terminal's pier 1 there was an RTG breakdown last week.

Single access to container terminals, bulk facilities and petroleum complex

"Then, to crown it all: the access to the port is not fit for purpose and never has been," Dave says. "It's been an issue for literally years and nothing's been done about it. The single road access along Bayhead Road carries traffic to the petroleum storage tanks at the Cutler Complex from where KwaZulu-Natal's diesel is distributed, so there is a massive amount of tankers in and out of the Complex. Then are other bulk facilities along Bayhead Road also being serviced by trucks."

Truck drivers are understandably very unhappy at having to wait for up to eight, nine, even ten hours for a single uplift or delivery at the terminal. The ideal target is 90 minutes.

"When the drivers locked their trucks and walked away with the keys two weeks ago, I was told that the majority of the trucks in the queue were not container trucks, but tankers and side loaders heading for the Cutler Complex. But when you're stuck in the queue, there's nowhere you can go."

There's been no investment to widen Bayhead Road by the National Port Authority which owns the road. "We do understand the Municipality and Port Authority are planning a road upgrade."

Copper cable theft

Another issue for refrigerated containers is the theft of power cables containing copper directly from trucks in transit along access roads such as South Coast Road, effectively disabling the refrigeration unit and risking product damage (to the disbelief of international companies).

Opportunities for privatization that would have improved competition and therefore efficiency were not grasped when they arose. There are private companies operating in the port but the container terminals area is a monopoly for Transnet Port Terminals.

Corruption enquiry causes paralysis at Transnet

Some in Transnet management are currently being investigated or have been suspended for alleged links to discredited former president Jacob Zuma and his business partners.

"The current problem at Transnet is a paralysis at top management level. No-one wants to make a decision to authorise investment into repairs or maintenance in case they also end up in front of a commission of enquiry."

Is it possible to discuss the problems at the harbour with Transnet officials?

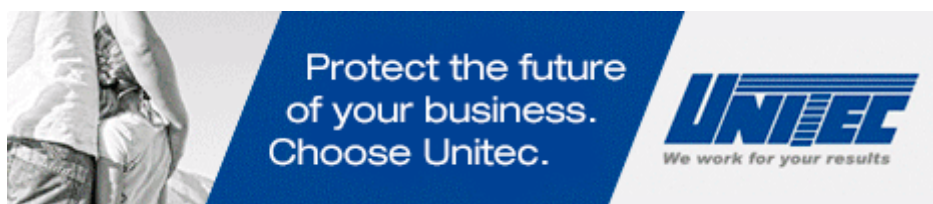
"There are regular meetings. If they resulted in progress and increased efficiency the place would be running better than Singapore," Dave quips.

"It's a real worry. In the peak citrus export season, which is approaching right now, these issues can become catastrophic. An efficient cold chain is essential if South Africa is to continue as a leading exporter of fruit worldwide, but at present it certainly is not the case here in Durban."

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