

Rail, the Gotthard and the Rhine–Alpine corridor

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Basel is a hub on the most important north-south freight corridor of Europe, which links the North Sea ports with the ports of northern Italy and the industrial regions of Lombardy and Piedmont. The European Union designates this axis as the Rhine–Alpine corridor of the Trans-European Transport Network, extending from Rotterdam and Antwerp to Genoa.¹ Switzerland, which is not a member of the EU, participates in the corridor through the bilateral Land Transport Agreement and its own investments in rail infrastructure.

The New Rail Link through the Alps (NRLA, *NEAT*) is the centrepiece of these investments. The Gotthard Base Tunnel, opened in 2016 and at more than fifty-seven kilometres the longest railway tunnel in the world, together with the Ceneri Base Tunnel opened in 2020, allows heavy freight trains to cross the Alps on a flat line. The completion of the four-metre corridor in 2020 enabled the transport of semi-trailers with a corner height of four metres by rail on the Gotthard axis.² The Swiss policy of shifting freight from road to rail, anchored in the Alpine Protection Article of the Federal Constitution, depends on the efficiency of these lines and on the capacity of the feeder routes in Germany and Italy.³

The feeder routes have been the weak point of the corridor. The upgrade of the Karlsruhe–Basel line in Germany, agreed in a bilateral treaty in 1996, has advanced slowly. Its completion is expected only in the 2030s or later. In August 2017, the collapse of a tunnel under construction at Rastatt interrupted the Rhine Valley line for several weeks and paralysed a large part of the freight traffic through Basel.⁴ The Rastatt incident led to claims by rail freight companies and shippers and showed how the interdependence of the corridor transmits disruptions across borders.

The marshalling yard at MuttENZ, the terminals in Basel and Weil am Rhein, and the rail connections of the ports make the region a node where goods change between ship, train and truck. This trimodal function gives

Basel its importance in the logistics of the country, because goods arriving by water can be distributed by rail without passing through congested road networks. It also explains why the plans for a new container terminal in Basel North became one of the most debated infrastructure projects of the region.

1 Notes

1. Regulation (EU) No 1315/2013 on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) and Regulation (EU) No 913/2010 concerning a European rail network for competitive freight (Rail Freight Corridor Rhine-Alpine); the TEN-T Regulation was revised by Regulation (EU) 2024/1679. To be verified. ↩
2. On the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel (57 km) on 1 June 2016, of the Ceneri Base Tunnel in September 2020 and the completion of the four-metre corridor in December 2020, see the publications of the Federal Office of Transport and SBB. To be verified. ↩
3. Article 84 of the Federal Constitution (Alpine Protection Article, adopted by popular vote on 20 February 1994) and the Federal Act of 19 December 2008 on the Transfer of Heavy Goods Transport across the Alps from Road to Rail (Goods Traffic Transfer Act, SR 740.1). To be verified. ↩
4. On the agreement of Lugano of 6 September 1996 between Germany and Switzerland on ensuring capacity of the northern access to the NRLA, the progress of the Karlsruhe–Basel upgrade and the interruption of the Rhine Valley line at Rastatt from 12 August to 2 October 2017, see the publications of Deutsche Bahn, the German Federal Ministry for Digital and Transport and the Swiss Federal Office of Transport. Dates to be verified. ↩

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