

What the river carries

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The volumes handled in the Swiss Rhine ports fluctuate from year to year with the water level of the river, the state of the economy and the prices of energy. Over the past two decades, the total throughput by water has ranged between roughly five and seven million tonnes per year, with a declining tendency in the most recent years.¹ According to the figures usually quoted by the port authority, about a tenth of Swiss imports by weight arrive by Rhine vessel. For particular goods the share is considerably higher, since the Rhine route has traditionally carried a large part of the mineral oil products imported into Switzerland.²

Mineral oil illustrates how the river serves the security of supply. Switzerland has no oil production of its own and only one remaining refinery, at Cressier in the canton of Neuchâtel, after the refinery at Collombey in the Valais closed in 2015.³ Refined products such as heating oil, diesel and petrol therefore enter the country largely as finished products, by pipeline, rail, road and water. Compulsory stocks of mineral oil products, which importers must hold under the National Economic Supply Act and finance through a guarantee fund administered by the industry organisation Carbura, are stored in tank farms throughout the country, among them those in the Basel ports.⁴

Container traffic has grown in importance since the 1970s and has changed the character of the port. Containers arrive from the North Sea ports on Rhine barges that carry several hundred units each on the lower stretches of the river and fewer on the upper stretch, where bridge clearances and water depth limit the loading. In Basel, they are transferred to rail and road for delivery to customers across Switzerland. The container throughput of the Swiss Rhine ports amounts to roughly one hundred thousand twenty-foot equivalent units per year, a modest figure compared with Rotterdam or Antwerp that nonetheless makes Basel a relevant node in the hinterland network of the North Sea ports.⁵

Bulk goods complete the picture. Gravel and sand, cement, scrap metal, grain and animal feed, fertilisers and salt arrive or leave by water. Exports by Rhine vessel are smaller than imports, which means that many barges sail downstream with partial loads or empty, a structural imbalance that weighs on freight rates and that the port and the shipping companies have long tried to reduce. Waste for incineration and recycled materials have been among the goods for which new downstream flows have been sought.⁶

1 Notes

1. On the annual throughput of the Swiss Rhine ports (water-side handling in tonnes), see the annual reports and statistics of the Swiss Rhine Ports and the Federal Statistical Office. Figures to be verified. ↩
2. On the share of the Rhine ports in Swiss imports by weight (often stated as about 10 per cent) and in mineral oil imports (often stated as about one quarter to one third), see the publications of the Swiss Rhine Ports and of the Federal Office for National Economic Supply. Figures to be verified. ↩
3. On the closure of the Tamoil refinery at Collombey in 2015 and the continued operation of the Varo refinery at Cressier, see the publications of Avenergy Suisse (formerly Erdöl-Vereinigung) and the Federal Office of Energy. To be verified. ↩
4. On the compulsory stockholding of mineral oil products by importers under the National Economic Supply Act and the role of Carbura as the organisation that administers the compulsory stocks and the guarantee fund, see the publications of Carbura and FONES. To be verified. ↩
5. On the container throughput of the Swiss Rhine ports (roughly 100,000 TEU per year in the years before 2025, with fluctuations), see the annual statistics of the Swiss Rhine Ports. Figures to be verified. ↩
6. On the imbalance between upstream and downstream volumes on the Rhine route to Basel and the efforts to develop export flows, see the annual reports of the Swiss Rhine Ports and the market observation reports of the CCNR. To be verified. ↩

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