



## ETF Railways Section Statement on the Crisis in European Rail Freight

Rail freight transport in Europe is facing a deep and accelerating crisis. Despite its strategic importance for climate objectives, industrial resilience and territorial cohesion, its modal share has been declining for decades.<sup>1</sup> This trend stands in stark contrast to the sector's potential: rail freight reduces greenhouse gas emissions, alleviates road congestion, and supports key European value chains such as steel, chemicals, cement and automotive manufacturing. Yet these societal benefits are not reflected in the current policy and funding framework.

ETF represents railway workers from 29 European countries. Their daily work keeps Europe's rail system running. Today, they warn that without decisive action, Europe risks a structural collapse of rail freight capacity, including the disappearance of the single-wagon-load system, which is essential for industrial connectivity, flexible logistics, and Europe's preparedness.

ETF welcomed the European Commission's Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy's and modal shift goals which aim to increase rail freight traffic by 50% by 2030 and double by 2050. However, it must be concluded that the European rail system is currently far from achieving these objectives. We therefore reiterate our call for ambitious modal share targets as part of a broader strategy to reduce the negative transport externalities. Such targets are essential to rebalance competition between transport modes, shift traffic towards the most sustainable forms of transport, and ensure that the necessary financial resources are allocated to achieve these goals.

The ETF Railways Section stresses that the crisis in the rail freight sector is not inevitable. It is the result of long-standing chronic underinvestment, insufficient public support, and the detrimental effects of liberalisation. To reverse the decline and build a sustainable, resilient and socially just freight system, Europe must fundamentally reorient its rail freight strategy.

We outline the following priorities:

### 1. Recognise rail freight as a public service

Given its essential contribution to society, the economy and the environment, ETF calls on EU institutions and Member States to formally recognise rail freight as a public service. This recognition shall enable stable, long-term public responsibility and funding to maintain strategic capacities, protect territorial coverage and align rail freight with Europe's climate and industrial objectives. It is about securing the public interest and continuity of essential services.

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Disclaimer: The English version of this text is the official version. In the event of discrepancies in other language versions, the English content shall prevail.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport, EU transport in figures – Statistical pocketbook 2025, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2832/2584130>



## 2. A coherent long-term strategy backed by sustained public investment

A viable rail freight system requires predictable, long-term and adequate public funding. Investments must focus on:

- maintaining, renewing and expanding infrastructure capacity
- improving network quality and density
- ensuring territorial coverage, including feeder lines, industrial sidings and marshalling yards
- supporting rolling stock renewal and maintenance capacity over long investment cycles

Public responsibility for essential freight functions is indispensable to ensure that key services can operate in the public interest even when they are not commercially profitable. This requires a governance model where public authorities can guarantee continuity, quality and long-term planning. To this end, the ETF calls for the European Commission to lift all state aid restrictions in what concerns rail freight transport.

## 3. Strategic Support for Single Wagon Load Transport

We particularly highlight the single-wagon-load (SWL) system as an irreplaceable component of Europe's industrial and logistics infrastructure. It enables rail to serve regional businesses, smaller manufacturing plants, and strategic industrial sectors that cannot fill full block trains. Without SWL, these flows would shift almost entirely to road transport, increasing emissions, congestion, and infrastructure wear, weakening the economic cohesion of Europe's regions. SWL also plays a critical feeder role: it supplies and consolidates volumes for larger block trains. This supply chain cannot be divided; all segments rely on each other to function. Eliminating SWL in the name of short-term "optimisation" would therefore trigger cascading negative effects across the entire rail freight network.

Because SWL is more costly and labour-intensive than block train operations, it is particularly vulnerable to restructuring and often the first victim in cost-cutting exercises. ETF therefore calls for targeted operational support to ensure the continuity and modernisation of SWL services. Without strategic support, Europe risks losing a system that underpins industrial competitiveness, regional accessibility, and the viability of the wider rail freight network.

## 4. Cooperation, not competition, as the foundation of a European rail freight network

Rail freight can only function as a network if railway operators are encouraged, not discouraged, to cooperate. For technical and operational reasons, no single company can serve all of Europe. Cooperation must therefore be the norm, both within rail and across modes.

ETF calls for:

- authorities to allow strengthened cooperation between European rail operators to build a genuine European rail freight network
- interoperability and multimodal integration, especially connecting ports, logistics hubs and industrial regions



- involving major logistics players in the ecological transition, including minimum targets for rail use and systematic rail access in new logistics zones
- reintegrating combined transport activities into coherent commercial strategies to support multimodal platforms

Competition has not delivered the promised modal shift. Cooperation and public responsibility must take precedence.

## **5. Working conditions: the foundation of safety, quality and future recruitment**

Rail freight cannot grow without the workers who operate it. Yet working conditions have deteriorated under competitive pressure, leading to labour shortages and difficulties attracting new workers.

ETF demands:

- tamper-proof monitoring of working, driving and rest times to ensure safety and eliminate unjustified overtime
- guaranteed access to decent sanitary facilities for all workers
- equal pay for equal work in the same place, regardless of country of origin
- high-quality, standardised training guaranteed across Europe
- technological innovation, such as Digital Automatic Coupling, with the clear objective of improving safety and reducing physical strain, not the reduction of staff

A sustainable rail freight system must be built on decent work.

## **6. A level playing field across all modes**

Europe needs an inclusive transport policy that values each transport mode and the benefits they provide in terms of social, environmental, economic sustainability. Forcing cargo from rail to road only because road is kept artificially cheap due to exploitative labour practices is incompatible with Europe's commitments for better climate, better jobs and fair competition. Rail freight is in impossible competition with modes where social dumping is widespread and environmental costs are externalised and borne by society. A credible modal shift strategy must therefore:

- internalise negative social and environmental costs across all modes and reward positive externalities
- improve compliance with social and environmental regulations in road transport
- ensure fair taxation of fuel, energy and VAT
- integrate rail into industrial relocation and logistics planning through systematic analysis of freight flows

Only a comprehensive transport policy can deliver the shift Europe needs.

## **7. Solidarity with workers and a call for urgent action**

ETF expresses its full solidarity with rail freight workers and trade unions across Europe who are mobilising against job losses and for the future of their sector. Restructuring processes must avoid



redundancies and ensure safety and the long-term viability of the system.

Rail freight is indispensable to achieving a sustainable, resilient and socially just European transport system. The time for incremental adjustments is over. Europe must act now, decisively and coherently, to secure the future of rail freight and the workers who make it possible.