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Imports at U.S. Container Gateways



Import cargo volume at the largest U.S. container gateways has begun its seasonal rise, but is expected to be largely flat compared with last year's record high numbers, the National Retail Federation and Hackett Associates said in their monthly Port Tracker report.

Year-over-year container totals this year have been skewed by comparisons with the early months of 2015, when West Coast ports were slowed by severe delays in January and February before rebounding in March, and several East and Gulf coast ports handled additional ships.

"Last year was a roller coaster, but this year we're expecting a nice, steady climb right through the summer," said Jonathan Gold, NRF vice president for supply chain and customs policy. "We're finally getting back to normal patterns as cargo builds up toward the back-to-school season and eventually the holiday season. Despite the year-over-year comparisons, these are still strong numbers."

Ports covered by Global Port Tracker handled 1.54 million 20-foot-equivalent units in February, the latest month for which after-the-fact numbers are available. That was up 3.7 percent from January and up 28.9 percent from unusually low figures in February 2015, when West Coast ports suffered a near-shutdown during bitter longshore contract negotiations.

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The Port Tracker report, produced for NRF by the consulting firm Hackett Associates, covers Los Angeles, Long Beach, Oakland, Seattle and Tacoma on the West Coast; New York-New Jersey, Virginia, Charleston, Savannah, Port Everglades and Miami on the East Coast, and Houston on the Gulf Coast

March volume at the ports was estimated at 1.35 million TEUs, down 22.1 percent from the surge of traffic in March 2015, when the new West Coast contract settlement released a backlog of cargo. April is forecast at 1.5 million TEUs, down 0.8 percent; May, 1.58 million TEUs, down 2.1 percent; June, 1.56 million TEUs, down 0.6 percent; July, 1.61 million TEUs, down 0.5 percent, and August, 1.61 million TEU, down 3.9 percent.

Volume through the ports in the first half of 2016 is expected to total 9 million TEUs, up 1.8 percent from a year earlier. Total volume for 2015 was 18.2 million TEUs, up 5.4 percent from 2014.

Mario O. Moreno, senior economist at IHS Maritime & Trade, forecasts that U.S. containerized imports at all ports will rise 5.3 percent this year, to 20.8 million TEUs.

Despite high retail inventory levels and other mixed economic indicators, Hackett Associates Founder Ben Hackett noted that overall retail sales were up 0.2 percent in February over January and rose 0.6 percent when gasoline, automobiles and restaurants are excluded.

“That was not spectacular but still up, suggesting that there is still some steam left in U.S. consumers,” Hackett said. “They are shrugging off the gloomy global outlook.”

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