

US ag shippers navigate creaky supply chain not built for modern disruption

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[Bill Mongelluzzo, Senior Editor, Trans-Pacific](#) | May 25, 2026, 10:00 AM EDT

US agricultural shippers are facing increasing and costly challenges in getting their goods to global markets as the war in the Middle East and schedule changes by ocean carriers upset the cadence of their operations.

“Container availability, schedule changes, rail delays from the interior of the country; these things can combine and create sort of a monster for us,” Christopher Jennum, global manager of export logistics and marketing at the Dairy Farmers of America, told the annual Agriculture Transportation Coalition (AgTC) conference this week in Tacoma.

Ag exporters have always faced logistical challenges because their crops are grown in the interior US and shipped through ports located hundreds of miles away. This makes it difficult for exporters to secure empty containers, plan their rail moves to the ports, and meet marine terminal requirements for the on-time delivery of their boxes. Shippers must commit to delivery of their containers weeks ahead of time.

“They’re committing to an export window that hasn’t formed,” said Vijay Harrell, CEO of logistics provider Tradelanes.

Additionally, ag exporters are operating in a transportation environment designed decades ago and not equipped to handle modern day disruptions such as the pandemic and now the war in the Middle East.

“I think the system that has carried us this far is starting to show some wear and tear,” Ken O’Brien, CEO of Gemini Shippers Association, told AgTC. “The disruption we face has somehow fundamentally changed our industry.”

That wear and tear has affected the reliability of service, while communication between carriers and their customers has been compromised and the ability to accurately forecast supply and demand has been degraded, he said.

“Both (carriers and customers) have to do a better job as to how we forecast demand,” O’Brien said.

The fact that ag exports originate across a vast heartland and are shipped through a number of gateways makes it difficult for ocean carriers to consistently provide the equipment and services their customers demand and need, said Patrick “PJ” McGrath, senior vice president for commercial at Hapag-Lloyd in North America.

If all imports and exports went through either Los Angeles-Long Beach or New York-New Jersey, serving shippers in the interior would be easy and much less costly for the ocean carriers. They’re not, but there is a strategy, McGrath said.

“So how do I look at each individual piece? It boils down to communication (between the parties),” he said.

Communication among parties is crucial

Carriers must do a better job of communicating disruptions in vessel scheduling and services, as well as the fuel surcharges they are implementing due to the war in the Middle East, said Irina Brown, cotton export specialist at Dunavant Global Logistics Group.

“The biggest problem is managing communication during disruptions, but it is super hard when you have trouble receiving responses from carriers, especially during the past year,” Brown told AgTC. “We get responses from carriers that make no sense.”

Rapidly rising fuel costs and accompanying surcharges, which vary from carrier to carrier, have become a huge cost burden for shippers, said Cynthia Tathwell, supply chain logistics specialist at Columbia Grain.

“I’ve seen unjustified rises in rates and billing practices outside of published tariffs,” Tathwell said. “It’s a pattern across the industry.”

She added that she has challenged these charges, which has its own set of problems, noting that disputes “equal time and money for both sides.”

FMC ‘has teeth’

Ag exporters also face ongoing problems with transportation providers in the levying of detention fees for the late return of equipment to the marine terminal or railyard and demurrage charges for containers remaining at a marine terminal or railyard after free storage time has expired.

Laura DiBella, chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission (FMC), told the ag shippers the agency is aware of these practices and will move to stop any unfair implementation of detention and demurrage fees.

“You are going to see plenty more on that,” DiBella told AgTc. “We’re definitely taking a more aggressive stance.”

Whether it’s addressing unfair detention and demurrage fees or fuel surcharge issues, the FMC has various investigatory and enforcement powers it will use to move against unfair practices, she said.

“The FMC has teeth,” DiBella said. “It has very big teeth.”

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