

Box traffic in Belgium has effectively been carved up by the competing giants PSA and DP World, although both companies suffered as a result of last year's downturn, writes Juan Ferrer

Battle for supremacy

In 2009, box throughput at the Port of Antwerp fell by 15.6% to 7.3m teu.

Prospects for 2010, however, seem to be better, given that in the last quarter of 2009 a number of carriers, most notably Maersk, decided to resume calls at the port, while others are also in discussions.

In terms of containers, half of the traffic handled continues to use the section of Deurganckdok located behind the dock gates. The rest uses the two new facilities on the tidal part of the River Scheldt. Here, the port authority says that there is sufficient reserve capacity for many years to come.

"German ports suffered more from the recent downturn than did Antwerp, mainly due to the fact that they have lost considerable flows of transshipment to Rotterdam and, to a minor extent, to Antwerp itself," said a port authority spokesperson, pointing out that Antwerp is now Europe's second largest container port.

In terms of landside movement, road dominates with 57%, but inland waterway accounts for a credible 32% and rail for



PSA's Europa terminal one of five at Antwerp

11%. The port's policy is to favour the use of the latter two, and future investment will reflect this.

DP World operates three major terminals at Antwerp, including Delwaidedock, which is behind the lock system on the River Scheldt, and the more recently opened Antwerp Gateway, which is on the left bank of the river. A third terminal, DP World Breakbulk NV, is a joint venture with Conti and Rickmers and is a conventional general cargo,

common-user terminal.

Estimated throughput last year was in the region of 1.2m teu and Eric Notermann, managing director of DP World Antwerp, said he was "cautiously optimistic" for the coming year, as the global economy recovers from the downturn.

"The majority of the traffic we handle nowadays at Antwerp goes through the Antwerp Gateway terminal, while Delwaidedock is more focused on north-south trades, which tend to

attract smaller, Panamax-type vessels," he noted.

The bulk of the container traffic reported by DP World at Antwerp is import-export, with just 10% of the rest rotated back out by sea. Transhipped boxes go mainly to nearby markets in the Baltic, Scandinavia and the UK, as well as to the Iberian peninsula. According to Notermann, Antwerp Gateway and Delwaidedock have sufficient capacity to accommodate existing traffic levels. Expansion is

a possibility, but it would be linked to customer demand.

The Antwerp Gateway operation is particularly interesting in that it is a semi-automated terminal, where automatic stacking cranes dominate yard operations, and the delivery of boxes to and from the quay is undertaken by straddle carriers. "We use the latter because of their flexibility and the fact that they were already a proven concept at the port," explained Notermann.

Claimed productivity on quayside gantry cranes is extremely good, with Delwaidedock achieving 34 moves-per-crane-hour and Antwerp Gateway 38 moves. The latter could accommodate 14,500 teu vessels, which are currently the largest afloat, but at present maximum vessel sizes tend to be in the 10,000 teu range.

The port has good inland waterway connections, with around 30% of total traffic at both terminals arriving or leaving by barge. DP World supports this trend by investing in intermodal inland terminals such as Liège, which is a logistics centre connected to Antwerp by the Albert Canal, and Beverdonk, which is also connected to the Albert Canal.

PSA to open seventh terminal

PSA HNN operates five container terminals in the Port of Antwerp: Deurganck, Noordzee and the Europa Terminal located on the tidal part of the river and MSC Home Terminal and

Churchill Terminal behind the locks. In 2009, the terminals handled 6.1m teu between them, equivalent to 80% of the port's total traffic. Should volumes warrant it, Deurganck Terminal alone could be expanded to handle 5.7m teu.

In Zeebrugge, PSA operates the Container Handling Zeebrugge (CHZ) facility, which has an annual capacity of 1m teu. Last year, it posted a throughput of 890,000 teu. A second container terminal, Zeebrugge International Container Port (ZICP), is under construction at the Albert II dock and will be operational in the fourth quarter of this year. It will be able to handle up to 500,000 teu in its initial phase, with four quayside gantry cranes in place. Its full capacity, which will involve increasing its quayside lift to 11 gantries, could eventually be 1.5m teu.

A company spokeswoman noted that PSA's Belgian

container terminals have an average gross crane rate of 35 container moves-per-crane-hour – which, she claimed, is amongst the highest in the region.

"Because of its inland location, the Port of Antwerp is very well positioned to serve a wide hinterland, either by truck, barge or rail. The Port of Zeebrugge, which is positioned directly on the North Sea coast, is better positioned for transshipment and for intra-European short-sea services. This also reflects in the modal split figures of the ports. Zeebrugge has a much higher transshipment percentage, whereas Antwerp has a higher truck and barge percentage," remarked the spokeswoman.

MSC Home Terminal received a call in April 2009 from the *MSC Beatrice*, reputed to be one of the largest vessels afloat, being

366 m long and capable of accommodating 14,000 teu. MSC intends to deploy this size of vessel on routes between northwest and southern Europe and the Middle and Far East.

The spokeswoman also noted that deepening of the River Scheldt on the Dutch side of the border started on 12 February of this year, continuing the work that started on the Belgian side in 2007. The deepening of the river offers great advantages for vessels accessing the Port of Antwerp. Apart from permitting wider tide windows, it is expected that container ships with greater draughts will be able to sail downstream after the deepening work is completed in 12 months' time. Vessels will then be able to leave the port with a draught of at least 15 m, depending on the ship. ■



PSA controls 80% of box Antwerp traffic