

Baltimore preps for limited port reopening by end of April



Other ports along the US East Coast have been able to absorb the diverted volumes coming from Baltimore with no significant impact on their operations. Photo credit: David Adams / USACE

Michael Angell, Associate Editor | Apr 5, 2024, 5:30 PM EDT

The Port of Baltimore is preparing workarounds to start handling containers and other ocean freight on a limited basis within the next four weeks ahead of a planned full reopening to vessel traffic by the end of May. The expedited reopening marks a rapid recovery for Baltimore following the vessel collision and bridge collapse that closed its main shipping channel early last week.

Meanwhile, other ports along the US East Coast continue to process diverted Baltimore-bound cargo with little to no impact on their operations. Even so, ocean carriers are pushing diversion-related fees onto shippers during Baltimore's closure.

The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) said in a statement Thursday it expects to clear the wreckage of the Francis Scott Key Bridge from Baltimore's 50-foot-deep shipping channel by the end of May, "restoring port access to normal capacity."

It was unclear in the immediate aftermath of the March 26 collision of the 9,962-TEU Dali into the bridge how long it would take for the port to reopen. Gen. Scott Spellmon said in the statement the USACE now has "a better understanding of the immense and complex work" of removing the 4,000 tons of debris resting on top of the Dali, allowing it to be refloated.

"A fully opened federal channel remains our primary goal," Spellmon said. "These are ambitious timelines that may still be impacted by significant adverse weather conditions or changes in the complexity of the wreckage."

Ahead of the full reopening, the USACE said it will open a 35-foot-deep channel by the end of April that will support one-way vessel traffic into Baltimore harbor. That channel will support the restart of a container-on-barge service offered by Columbia Coastal Transport that shuttles between the Port of Virginia, which has been receiving ships diverted from Baltimore, and Seagirt Marine Terminal in Baltimore.

The service uses two US-flagged barges of approximately 900-TEU capacity. Transit time from Norfolk to Baltimore is roughly two days.

In addition, the 35-foot channel will allow some roll-on/roll-off (ro/ro) vessels to resume calls at Baltimore. Baltimore's Dundalk Marine Terminal and Fairfield Marine Terminal, which handle the bulk of the Baltimore's ro/ro vessels, are also cut off to vessel traffic, forcing ro/ro vessels to divert to the TradePoint Atlantic logistics facility located outside the port's inner harbor.

The container-on-barge service would complement inter-port rail services that are moving Baltimore-bound ocean containers diverted to the Port of New York and New Jersey back to Seagirt for local pickup. Norfolk Southern is working on a similar service that will bring ocean containers to Virginia's Front Royal inland port, where they can be trucked into Maryland.

'Diversion charge' on Baltimore cargo

About 80% of the container freight originally destined for Baltimore prior to the port's closure has now been diverted to Norfolk and terminals at New York-New Jersey, according to supply chain visibility platform project44.

Maersk and Mediterranean Shipping Co. plan to divert 16 ships operating in 2M Alliance services with Baltimore cargo to New York-New Jersey through May 7. Another

four ships in the 2M Alliance were diverted to the Port of Virginia.

Evergreen Marine discharged Baltimore cargo from the 14,354-TEU Triton at Virginia last week. Another Evergreen ship, the 14,354-TEU Talos, is expected to call New York-New Jersey this weekend.

Despite the diversions, project44 said New York-New Jersey and Virginia are “equipped to handle the additional volume that’s incoming from Baltimore.” The Shipping Association of New York and New Jersey (SANYNJ), which represents maritime employers, told the Journal of Commerce that “the port is fluid.”

“We handled nearly a million containers less in 2023 compared to 2022, so there is ample capacity for any cargo which comes our way,” SANYNJ said in a statement.

With the diversions ongoing, a Baltimore-based ocean freight forwarder said he was charged a fee for rerouting containers. The forwarder provided the *Journal of Commerce* with an email it said it received from Evergreen that showed a \$794 “diversion charge” for cargo that landed in Norfolk, along with separate storage charges for the cargo.

Separately, the US Federal Maritime Commission sent an advisory Friday that said despite the disruptions from the Baltimore bridge collapse, ocean carriers and marine terminals must ensure detention and demurrage charges are “reasonable.”

Contact Michael Angell at michael.angell@spglobal.com

© 2024 S&P Global. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

You are permitted to print or download extracts from this material for your personal use only. None of this material may be used for any commercial or public use. For more information on reprints/eprints, please visit <https://subscribe.joc.com/mediasolutions/>.