

Gulf Coast ports report cargo volume surge in March

Container flows rise in Houston, New Orleans, Mobile; exports fall in Corpus Christi

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Port Houston saw a 20% year-over-year increase in shipments of twenty-foot equivalent units in March. (Photo: Jim Allen/FreightWaves)

Container cargo flows increased at ports in Houston, New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama, in March, but shipments of crude oil fell slightly at the Port of Corpus Christi, Texas.

Port Houston container shipments up 20% in March

[Port Houston](#) handled 360,991 twenty-foot equivalent units in March, a 20% year-over-year (y/y) increase.

Officials said total cargo flows through the Houston Ship Channel and the port's two container facilities, Barbours Cut and Bayport, climbed 4% during the first quarter.

"First-quarter container volumes are very strong through March," Roger Guenther, Port Houston's executive director, said during a Port Commission meeting Tuesday.

Consumer spending on items like furniture and appliances contributed to loaded import volumes that were up 23% y/y in March and 14% year to date, Guenther said.

"The shippers are saying [demand] is much stronger than what they even anticipated," Guenther said. "The National Retail Federation, one of our representatives of the retailers that import cargo, which a lot of that comes from Asia, are saying that the remainder of the year for imports is going to remain very strong."

From January to March, Port Houston handled 1.06 million twenty-foot equivalent units year to date, an increase of 15% compared to the same period in 2023.

"We export a lot of hydrocarbons, plastic resins and other things that are produced in and around here, and they continue to be solid growth," Guenther said.

Loaded export volumes, which are primarily resins, also increased by 12% y/y in March and 15% year-to-date, totaling 404,124 TEUs year to date.

"We're already over 1 million TEUs for the first quarter, so we're off to a great start," Guenther said. "Our multipurpose facilities and our general cargo and our Turning Basin General Cargo Terminal are down, but that's always kind of a cyclical environment there."

General import cargo was down 29% y/y in March at 524,490 tons. Steel imports decreased 18% y/y to 345,473 tons, while steel exports decreased 107% y/y to 67,747 tons.

Lumber was up 16% in March and 18% year to date. Total tonnage across all of Port Houston's terminals is up 4% through March, totaling 13.4 million tons year to date.

Port Houston recorded 685 ship calls in March, an 8% y/y decline, while barge calls totaled 307, a 2% y/y decrease.

Port of New Orleans records spike in container moves, slip in breakbulk cargo

[The Port of New Orleans](#) reported moving 45,214 TEUs in March, a 24% y/y increase.

New Orleans recorded a 54% y/y decline in total breakbulk tonnage at 71,279 short tons during the month.

"We have seen an increase in containerized cargo in both imports and exports during the first quarter of this calendar year, becoming a record quarter with volumes we had not seen since the first half of 2021," Kimberly Curth, Port of New Orleans spokeswoman, told FreightWaves. "Breakbulk lumber imports continued as well."

Top container exports included plastic resins and miscellaneous chemicals. Coffee and wood products were the top container imports. Top breakbulk commodities for the month included steel and natural rubber.

"The port's overall volumes this quarter reached a total of 133,845 TEUs, representing not only a 19% y/y increase, but also a record quarter with volumes we had not seen since the first half of calendar year 2021," Curth said. "This upward trend is very encouraging and consistent with higher reliability in our weekly ocean carrier services. It also translates into more steady volumes from month to month than those from previous quarters."

During the quarter, loaded imports were up by 19% y/y, while loaded exports are up by 16% y/y.

Imports of empty containers are up 41% y/y in the quarter, which is "another positive metric that supports our available empty supply," Curth said.

"There were 100 vessel calls this quarter, representing a 5% increase compared to the same period last year," Curth said. "We are closing the third quarter of fiscal year 2024 with improved service reliability, volume growth and optimism as we continue onward and forward."

Port of Corpus Christi sees lower crude oil shipments in March

[The Port of Corpus Christi](#) saw a 1.7% y/y decrease in total cargo to 17.2 million tons in March.

The port handled 10.6 million total tons of crude during the month, a 1.9% decline compared to the same year-ago period. Exports of crude oil for March came in at 9.9 million tons, a 2% y/y decrease.

Shipments of petroleum totaled 4.9 million tons during March, a 9% y/y decrease. Exports of petroleum were at 3.8 million tons for the month, a 9% y/y decline.

Dry bulk cargo increased 20% y/y to 891,041 tons in March, while chemical shipments fell 35% y/y to 358,102 tons.

Bulk grain shipments increased 104% y/y to 302,270 tons in March. Liquid bulk shipments dropped 66% y/y in March 45,390 tons.

The port had 450 barge calls in March, a 1.8% y/y decrease, as well as 198 ship calls, a 7% y/y decrease.

Port of Mobile records 53,608 TEUs in March

[The Port of Mobile](#), Alabama, marked its third-highest month in history, moving 53,608 TEUs in March. It represents a 27% y/y increase from the same period last year.

Year to date, the port's container operations have handled 563,537 TEUs.

"The port's ability to have one of its best ever months while the rest of the market is experiencing headwinds is a testament to our strength," John Driscoll, Alabama Port Authority director and CEO, said in a statement.