

Georgia port tops US ro-ro gateways

Brunswick vehicle volumes surge on projects, Key Bridge diversions

Stuart Chirls

Monday, February 17, 2025



Three ro-ro vessels are shown at Colonel's Island Terminal, Port of Brunswick, Ga. (Photo: Georgia Ports Authority)

The Port of Brunswick, Georgia, was the top U.S. port for vehicles in 2024.

Brunswick achieved a record year, totaling 901,912 units of autos and heavy equipment, up 13.3% and 160% y/y, respectively.

Georgia Ports President and Chief Executive Griff Lynch was quoted in a release as saying at the Brunswick State of the Port event that Colonel's Island Terminal has become the nation's busiest port for autos and heavy equipment, handling more than 2 million tons of roll-on/roll-off cargo in 2024.

Brunswick also was the top port for ro-ro exports at 600,000 tons, the port said, citing USATradeonline data.

The authority completed \$262 million worth of improvements at Brunswick in 2024, adding new warehousing and processing space, as well as 122 acres of ro-ro storage. Construction has started on a new rail yard on Colonel's Island, while a fourth berth for ro-ro vessels is in the engineering phase.

Brunswick also benefited from thousands of vehicle shipments diverted from the Port of Baltimore after the Key Bridge disaster shut down ro-ro handling in April.

Baltimore, until this year the leading ro-ro gateway, saw vehicle shipments decline by 11% in 2024.

The Georgia port continues to scale up, and a new rail yard on the south side of Colonel's Island Terminal will increase the capacity to export vehicles arriving by rail. Improvements to the existing Myd Harris Yard will also bring rail switching onto the terminal.

"Our growth comes as auto manufacturers seek to increase their business through Georgia," Lynch said. "This project will expand capacity, improve our ability to serve inland factories, and increase the safety of rail operations, both on- and off-terminal, and lessen our community impact with our port neighbors."

Lynch said the added capacity will extend Brunswick's service area, because moving cargo from farther-to-reach inland factories to the Georgia coast is more cost-effective by rail than truck.

Phase 1 of the new rail yard will increase the port's annual rail capacity from approximately 150,000 autos to more than 340,000 by mid-2025. Phase 2 will boost capacity to 590,000 units, greater than three times the current capacity.

More than 90% of vehicles moving through Brunswick by rail are U.S.-manufactured exports.

Separately, construction on a fourth ro-ro berth is in the planning stages and expected to start in summer 2025. The new berth should be complete in 2027 and will more efficiently accommodate vessels carrying 10,800-plus car equivalent units (CEUs).

A 20-year agreement signed with Oslo, Norway-based vehicle carrier Wallenius Wilhelmsen in April 2024 consolidates the company's Georgia logistics operations at the Port of Brunswick.

"At its expanded Brunswick facility, WW is not only handling ro-ro processing, but also order fulfillment for heavy equipment, configuring the machinery for the end user before delivery," Lynch said.

The authority's master plan calls for all ro-ro cargo to be located in Brunswick, and container trade in Savannah.

Lynch said market forces favor the continued expansion of Brunswick trade.

Two major factors include the rise of manufacturing and a growing population in the U.S. Southeast. Auto exports grew by 9% in 2024, and imports at Colonel's Island were up by 20% y/y.

Lynch said Brunswick anticipates handling larger vessels, carrying a greater number of autos and heavy equipment. The typical ro-ro ship today has a capacity of 4,000 to 8,000 CEUs. Carriers are expected to bring 10,800-CEU vessels to Brunswick in the next two to three years.

"Similar to the dynamic of growing container ships, these larger ro-ro vessels are expected to call on fewer ports and handle greater influxes of units during each visit," he said. "The 1,700-acre Colonel's Island Terminal is uniquely qualified to handle these larger transactions thanks to our scale of operations and efficiency."

At the same time, federal projects will also upgrade the shipping channel in Brunswick to handle larger vessels, and the state has allocated more than \$6 million for special harbor improvements including a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plan for a bend widener and expansion of the turning basin. An expanded vessel meeting area at St. Simons Sound will improve safety for two-way traffic.

Congress has approved approximately \$38 million for Brunswick, including the \$11.35 million federal share of the harbor improvements project. An additional \$26.6 million is designated for dredging the federal waterway to its full authorized depth of 36 feet in the inner harbor and 38 feet in the outer harbor.

Lynch noted that to date, federal funding and procurement has fallen short for both the annual maintenance dredging and the harbor modification project. He called on the Corps to identify a workable solution for these projects.

“Federal agencies must keep pace with this global trend by performing timely dredging to maintain safe channels in a dependable, proactive manner.”

Find more articles by Stuart Chirls [here](#).