

No container tsunami heading to Los Angeles, says port chief

Tariff pause spurring increase in bookings from China

Stuart Chirls

Monday, May 19, 2025



The head of the busiest U.S. container port doesn't expect a big jump in import shipments during the pause in China tariffs.

"Next we will see an uptick in [vessel] bookings from China, but I don't see a huge surge that will impact the Port of Los Angeles," said port Executive Director Gene Seroka, in a monthly media briefing. "Probably less than the 30% that we had during the 'peak of the peak' of COVID.

"From all the stakeholders we talk with and all the data we review, we are seeing bookings pick up at Asia ports. But prices are still very much elevated, leading retailers, manufacturers and other importers to carefully evaluate their strategies."

Representatives from China and the U.S. on May 12 agreed to temporarily pause reciprocal tariffs for 90 days, slashing the levies on Chinese goods from 145% to 30%.

Heading into June-July and the beginning of the traditional peak shipping season, Seroka expects a four-week stretch with port volume at 70-80% of normal.

"Goods in China that were sitting and waiting to move, we can deal with that [volume]" he said. "There has been lower ship utilization than liners would like, so they have capacity to fill. But we don't see that we'll have a surge in cargo that will have ships waiting at anchor like before [during the

pandemic]. In fact, one logistics company told me that vessel bookings three weeks out are only 80% of what was usual.”

April volume grew 9.5% year over year at Los Angeles to about 843,000 twenty-foot equivalent units as shippers pushed to bring in cargo ahead of tariffs. It was the third-best April on record and 10th straight month of y/y growth.

Imports totaled 439,000 TEUs, up 5% y/y, while exports tallied just 128,000 TEUs, down 3.5%, and the fifth consecutive month of declining volume.

But the first week of May saw imports buckle by 30% y/y on tariff-induced uncertainty, and that decline is likely to be “substantial” for the entire month, Seroka said, though he said exact figures were difficult to forecast.

In the short term, Seroka said, “it’s clear we’ll see a pullback in global trade. There’s been a whipsaw effect of financial data, markets, consumer sentiment, and we saw the downgrade of U.S. credit by Moody’s last week.”

Year to date, Los Angeles has handled 3.4 million TEUs, up 6.6% on 2024. The hub’s container volume grew 19 of the past 21 months since August 2023.

The port moved 25% more empty containers back to Asia, 842,000 TEUs, in April than a year ago.

“There is a concerted effort to better respond to the peaks and valleys of demand by pre-positioning empties by the liner operators,” Seroka said.

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