West Coast politicians, port executives protest ‘reckless’ tariffs

Officials warn trade disruptions will have dire consequences

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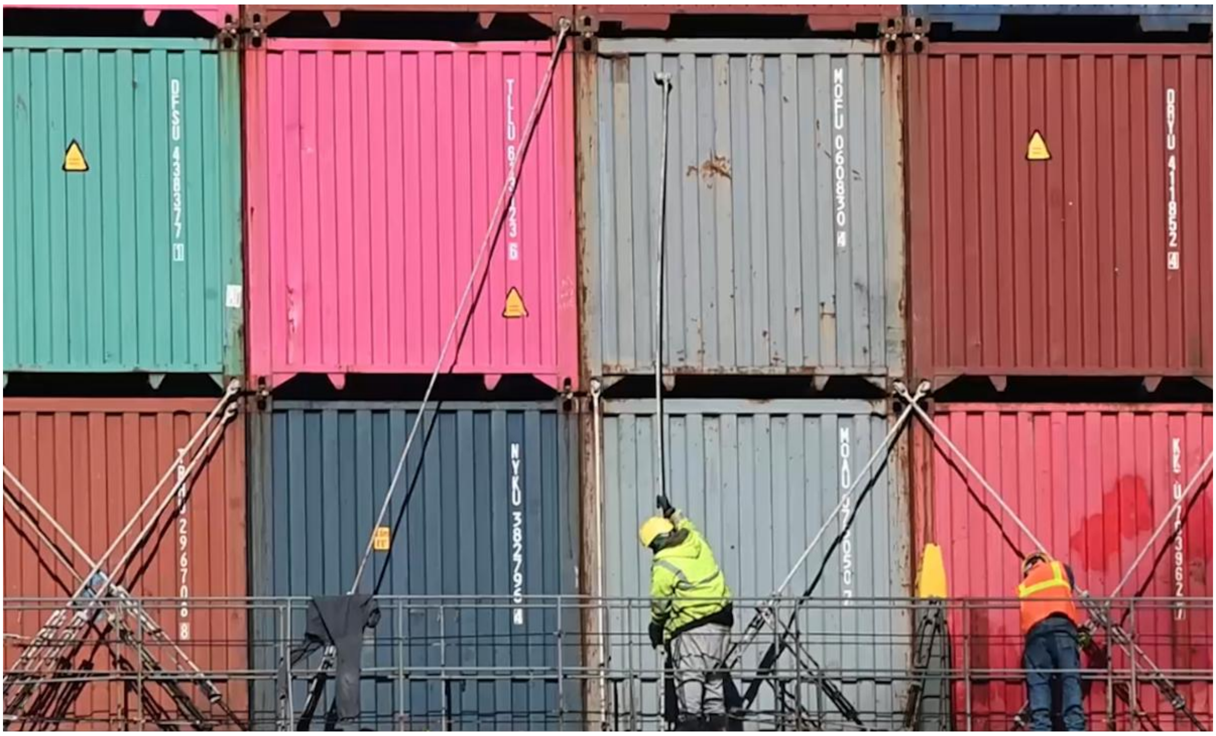

(Photo: Port of Tacoma)

A coalition of West Coast politicians and ports are warning that the Trump administration’s tariffs are precipitating significant supply chain disruptions that will have far-reaching consequences for both regional and national economies.

The officials from Washington, Oregon and California in a virtual press conference Thursday said that the window to minimize economic damage is rapidly closing, with small businesses already facing dire consequences comparable to those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., the Trump administration inherited a “remarkably strong and resilient American economy” but is now “single-handedly pushing this nation towards a painful Republican recession while forcing a tax increase on everyone.”

Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., highlighted the critical role of West Coast ports in the national economy, noting that Los Angeles and Long Beach handle 40% of the nation’s imports, and more than a third of all U.S. containerized trade.

That makes the gateway “the blinking red lights for our nation’s economy,” said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., making any disruption to their operations a matter of urgent national concern.

The economic forecast appears increasingly grim. The Port of Los Angeles has publicly projected imports to drop by approximately 35% within two weeks if the current tariff situation remains unchanged, with the Port of Long Beach making similar predictions.

Mario Cordero, executive director of the Port of Long Beach, confirmed these projections, noting that ocean shipping lines have canceled 34 sailings that would have called at the port over the next two months. Following a record first quarter in 2025, when importers frontloaded shipments in anticipation of tariffs, Cordero now expects more than a 30% drop in imports in May alone.

Long Beach handled more than $300 billion in cargo in 2024 supporting 2.7 million jobs nationwide. Cordero said China accounts for approximately 60% of imports and about 20% of exports, making the U.S.-China trade relationship particularly significant.

Port of Seattle Commissioner Ryan Calkins said trade facilitated by ports has led to "greater prosperity and quality of life for Americans," which are now threatened by tariffs disrupting both imports and exports. Calkins noted that when "imports are frozen because of these tariffs, it means that we also don't have an opportunity to export those agricultural goods," harming farmers in the Inland Northwest and California who depend on access to international markets.

Calkins said bonded warehouses around the port are full as importers hold shipments as customs clearance costs have skyrocketed due to tariffs.

At the Port of Tacoma, Commissioner Dick Marzano echoed these concerns, focusing on job losses among longshoremen, truckers and warehouse workers who are "slowly starting to lose man hours" due to the tariffs.

Marzano emphasized that the economic damage "won't happen overnight" and is not easily reversible, as it "takes years to establish customers." He warned that the uncertainty is threatening the survival of small and medium-size businesses throughout the coming year.

The current situation is "as dire for them as it was during COVID," when businesses were shut down. Particularly hard-hit are businesses dealing in products not grown or produced domestically, such as coffee and green tea. These businesses are already implementing cost-cutting measures, he said, including employee layoffs, with some facing the prospect of permanent closure.

American growers from California's Central Valley who depend on export markets in China, Asia and India face a particularly troubling scenario: If foreign buyers find alternative suppliers due to the trade war, they won't immediately return to American producers when tariffs are eventually lifted. This means American companies will "continue to suffer, lesser sales, lesser revenues, not be able to invest in their company, not be able to invest in expanding and growing, certainly not be able to invest in hiring more people."

More evidence of the effects of throttled trade: This week, Norfolk Southern (NYSE: NSC) in a customer advisory said it was cancelling 20 international intermodal rail trade lanes to East Coast ports.

Port officials said they are actively working to mitigate the damage by seeking new business opportunities. The Northwest Seaport Alliance of Seattle and Tacoma has representatives in Vietnam, which has been "a key target for West Coast ports for additional cargo volume" since the first round of tariffs, said Calkins. They're also exploring potential trade relationships with Cambodia and India, as well as developing new energy cargo opportunities, particularly in renewable energy.

The coalition warned that the consequences of the tariffs extend far beyond the ports themselves. For consumers, these disruptions will likely result in empty store shelves and higher prices as importers pass increased costs downstream. Beyond retail impacts, the tariffs threaten millions of jobs connected to port operations, affecting longshore workers, truckers, logistics personnel, retailers, farmers and factory workers throughout the supply chain.

In the Senate, Democratic lawmakers have been working to counteract what Wyden described as “Trump’s reckless tariffs” to protect the economy. However, these efforts face significant opposition, with Senate Republicans narrowly winning a vote to maintain the tariffs despite the projected economic fallout.

The political impasse comes at a critical moment. According to Wyden, the first quarter has already seen economic contraction attributed to these policies and related rhetoric. He warned that “every day that Donald Trump fails to reverse course, America moves closer to a recession of Donald Trump’s making.”

“In the short term, consumers will start finding fewer choices and higher prices on the shelves,” Cordero warned. “Any sort of long-term sustained downturn in shipments caused by the tariff will be detrimental to the job market. Companies are going to be moving less cargo and will have less work for their workforce throughout the supply chain.”

Despite these challenges, Cordero expressed cautious optimism that underlying issues could be resolved through appropriate policy actions.

“I’m confident that the White House and Congress all recognize the significance of these issues and are working to resolve them to ensure America’s economy can continue to thrive.”

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