

What about the activity of river transport on the Rhone in this period of global health and economic crisis?

After interviewing the Port of Montreal and VNF (Voies Navigables de France), in charge of a large part of the French waterway network, we asked another national player: the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône (CNR). As operator of the Rhone River, one of its missions is to develop transport on the 330 km of waterway linking Lyon to the Mediterranean. More than 5.6 million tons of goods were transported in 2019.

Pierre Meffre, Director of Port Development and Thomas San Marco, Delegate general of CNR and Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Lyon Terminal (CNR subsidiary in charge of handling at the Port of Lyon) answered our questions.



*Pierre Meffre and Thomas San Marco
Photo credit: CNR*

What are, to date, the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on waterway traffic and port activity on the Rhone river?

Over the first four months of the year, the tonnages transported fell by 30%, with an impact of -19% caused by the only health crisis in April. Container traffic experienced a similar trend, with a drop of 32% since January. For its part, cruise activity has not resumed as expected, following the annual maintenance operations on our locks that we carry out in March, which led to a stoppage of navigation. It is currently prohibited until at least the end of May. The season is shaping up to be very complicated and the cruise lines are registering a lot of cancellations. It will also be interesting to see if a new local tourism offer emerges as a result of this crisis, with a local and family clientele.

At the Port of Lyon, the leading port in the Rhone network, overall activity has been halved. Storage capacities for containers have been reached. Rail activity continued with 20 to 30 trains per week.

On both the Saone and the Rhone, there have been signs of an upturn in traffic over the past two weeks, but this remains to be confirmed.

What measures have you put in place to deal with this exceptional situation?

We have kept a team of 7 people on shift to ensure operations and maintenance at the Port of Lyon. Many companies¹ closed down at the start of the sanitary crisis, but most of them have reopened since last week. In order for the site to remain operational, we have maintained access control by an outside company.

CNR is going to support the companies installed on its industrial and port sites that are experiencing difficulties by proposing to them to postpone the payment deadlines for the 2nd quarter.

Further support is being considered for those of the 220 boat-lifters that we count, which will have had a significant impact on their business.

¹ A total of 70

How do you see the next few months in terms of a recovery in activity on the Rhone?

Container activity has in fact suffered several types of disruptions since the end of last year: firstly, national social movements, then the health crisis in China, which sharply slowed down world maritime traffic at the beginning of the year, and finally, on the Rhone, the incident of a barge carrying hazardous materials on one of our locks, which was closed for several weeks, interrupting traffic on the Rhone route until 28 March. The impact of this incident is certainly stronger than that generated by the health crisis. It is therefore urgent that economic activity should restart to re-launch the delivery circuits, evacuate the goods stored in the Port of Lyon to their place of destination in the metropolis, and receive the new flows that are beginning to arrive.

The growth dynamic recorded in 2019 for the container activity (+8.6%) is disrupted. Even if it is difficult to project on the basis of the figures of the last few days, a scenario of a decline of around 25% for this segment of activity over the year is nevertheless forecast.

Furthermore, **the activity is likely to be more unpredictable.** It can be seen that certain major seaports - Le Havre for France, Antwerp for Europe - were little affected by the Covid-19 crisis because they are major hubs for world goods traffic. This is not the case for the Marseilles-Lyon axis, which is more in decline. It is to be feared that river transport will suffer in the coming months.

It is less flexible than road or rail in the face of uncertain activity; it should also suffer from low fuel prices and still very fluid road traffic.

"The activity is likely to be more unpredictable (...). It is to be feared that river transport will suffer more in the coming months than road or rail transport."
Pierre Meffre



Container handling at the Port of Lyon terminal - Photo credit: CNR / Camille Moirenc

So you don't quite share Thierry Guimbaud's and Daniel Dagenais'² observation on the resilience of waterborne transport and its capacity to promote economic recovery?

Waterway transport is resilient, but it is still quite fragile in the Rhone-Saone basin. The players in the Rhone are ready to participate in the economic recovery. The river is operational, sufficiently equipped in terms of infrastructures and with a high level of quality services for navigators. CNR takes part in the management of 14 wide-gauge locks and 22 industrial and port sites between Lyon and the Mediterranean, i.e. one every 20 km. The infrastructures are already in place and ready to be optimized: **year-round traffic on the Rhone could be multiplied by 4 without an additional €1 investment!** And we still have another 100 hectares available along the riverside to receive companies wishing to develop river logistics. As far as services are concerned, our Navigation Management Centre, which remotely controls the locks in real time, has been monitoring and managing river traffic 7 days a week and 24 hours a day for 10 years now.

² Cf. the IAGF logbook of May 11, 2020

But we will have to be collectively vigilant to ensure that economic recovery does not come at the expense of the river, for the reasons we have given. This would be a failure, a step backwards, when we were on a growth trend and this mode of transport is essential for a successful energy and environmental transition. Without wishing to set one mode of transport against the other, we must give each one its proper place in order to achieve genuine complementarity in the service of sustainable mobility.

What advantages does water transport offer?

It is a safe, economical and ecological mode of transport. Thanks to the massification it allows, river freight emits four times less CO₂ per tonne transported than road transport and consumes five times less fuel. It helps to relieve road congestion, improve road safety and reduce noise pollution. Above all, ports, when they are located close to the heart of cities, can contribute to low-carbon urban logistics by limiting road transport for delivery over the last few kilometres.

There is a real potential for development in the Rhone Valley with the two major cities of Marseille and Lyon connected by waterway and the many companies established along the Rhone axis, particularly in the Chemical Valley. All the more so as the global ecosystem is balanced: river freight is almost equally divided between international import-export flows passing through the Port of Marseille (48% of tonnages) and domestic traffic for local services - cereals, materials for construction and public works or waste - carried out between the river ports of the basin (52%).



Barge in the Pierre-Bénite lock, near Lyon -

Photo credit: CNR / Camille Moirenc

So what are the conditions for river transport to have its rightful place tomorrow?

Already in the short term, it must be prevented from collapsing as a result of the global economic crisis caused by the coronavirus epidemic. Like many other sectors of activity that have been severely affected, **why can't inland waterway transport benefit from additional support measures from the State?**

Cooperation between port and waterway infrastructure managers and with all the stakeholders in the logistics chain is **another key factor**, for today and for tomorrow. CNR plays a major role in this, whether it be with VNF, for the Rhone-Saone basin, or the Grand Port Maritime de Marseille (GPMM), a port that is open to the Mediterranean and therefore to the whole world. Together with VNF, we are currently drawing up a river and port axis plan for freight and tourism. And we have been able to observe that the consultation organized in 2019 by the GPMM with the river players has enabled a better sharing of river-sea issues and has contributed to the revival of container transport between Fos and Lyon. We must continue these collaborative efforts to give more coherence to the river chain and keep the hinterland of the Grand Port Maritime de Marseille alive.

Finally, a **regulatory and fiscal evolution on a national scale is expected** so that the river does not remain the poor relation of public transport policy. One only has to look at the ambitious objectives set by the European Union (EU) to see that France is not there. The EU is aiming for a modal shift from road to rail and inland waterways of 30% by 2030 and 50% by 2050, for distances over 300 km.

The current crisis and the forthcoming economic recovery plan may provide an opportunity to no longer postpone the necessary regulatory measures and to give more room to inland waterways for the transport of manufactured goods in containers, but also bulk or dangerous goods.

"Let's give the river the place it can have in the recovery plan for the transportation of manufactured goods by containers, but also bulk or dangerous goods."

Thomas San Marco

All these measures will guarantee the future of the river, in addition to the actions carried out by each one. CNR has once again demonstrated in recent months its own investment by commissioning a second container gantry crane at the Port of Lyon to anticipate growth in volumes and improve productivity for shippers.



New container gantry crane at the Port of Lyon / Photo credit: CNR - Camille Moirenc

On another level, we plan to strengthen the incentive system for companies setting up on our sites and developing river traffic

Does the future of river transport require innovation to improve its competitiveness compared to other modes of transport?

Innovation must enable us to anticipate new needs and not only to catch up. River transport is in line with many economic and social expectations, be it digitalization, mitigation of the impacts of climate change, or better living in cities.

"Innovation must enable us to anticipate new needs and not just catch up."

In terms of **digital integration**, for example, blockchain technology was successfully tested last year on the Rhone-Saone axis. Besides the dematerialization of import-export procedures, this system promotes the exchange of information between all the players in the transport chain. It improves the traceability of freight and contributes to the fluidity and competitiveness of the intermodal routing of goods on the Rhone-Saone axis.

Can the ecological asset be strengthened as well?

Yes, it is indispensable and this is primarily achieved by greening the fleet. River transport must evolve in terms of motorization to consolidate its ecological lead.

We want to support a whole range of solutions, drawing on our expertise in renewable energies. We are exploring the green hydrogen sector, with a hydrogen pusher project with our partners VNF and CFT³. We are also planning to install renewable electricity connection terminals to

³ Compagnie Fluviale de Transport, Sogestran group

power freight or tourist boats at the quayside. At the entrance to the Port of Lyon, we have also set up a multi-energy green recharging station (electricity, hydrogen and biogas) for private individuals, public transport in the city and also for the transport companies that use our site every day. The renewable energies will enable the pre and post-road transport in the Port of Lyon to be made greener. Finally, we hope that the mobile river waste collection demonstrator⁴, which offers Lyon's inhabitants an ecological and local solution for getting rid of their bulky waste, can soon be deployed more widely.

We must also **be exemplary on our own sites**, limiting the environmental impacts of our activities and integrating them more into the urban landscape. This will promote their acceptability to the inhabitants, in complement to a better pedagogy on the services that a port brings to the city in terms of supplying stores and building sites, fuel supply, waste disposal...

Our ambition is indeed to make the Port of Lyon the urban hub of last-mile logistics.

Interviewed by Marie-Cécile Grisard

⁴ River'Tri service offered by SUEZ Recycling & Recovery, CFT, VNF and CNR