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Eurotunnel condemns new French toll

By Rose Jacobs

Eurotunnel, the Channel tunnel operator, has accused the owner of France's rail infrastructure of "effectively killing off rail freight" between the UK and continental Europe by imposing a new toll at a yard near Calais.

State-owned Réseau Ferré de France began charging €600 per convoy passing through Fréthun to or from the UK at the start of this year. The toll, which offsets the cost of security checks, "appears clearly to have a negative impact on the growth... achieved in the rail freight sector", said Eurotunnel on Tuesday.

Eurotunnel's freight business in the first quarter this year was flat compared with the same period in 2011, a levelling off after approximately 18 months of growth. John Keefe, head of communications, said, "with one blow they are effectively killing off international rail freight at a time that everyone wants to see international rail freight grow".

While the cross-Channel rail freight division contributes just a small portion of total Eurotunnel revenues, the group has high hopes for its growth on the back of rising concerns over road congestion, aircraft noise and pollution. Traffic in the division, as measured by number of trains, grew 14 per cent last year.

DB Schenker, Deutsche Bahn's freight operator, launched a weekly service between the UK and Poland late last year, operating through the Channel tunnel. Meanwhile, Eurotunnel's Europorte subsidiary, which runs freight trains in the UK and on the continent, is taking part in a scheme to launch high-speed cross-Channel freight services within the next 10 years.

Eurotunnel has offered to take over management of the Fréthun yard, arguing its experience running security checks at other ports of entry would help it reduce costs. RFF said on Wednesday that while bound by regulatory requirements, it was open to discussions with "all stakeholders... while taking into account the framework fixed by the Channel Tunnel's concession".

Eurotunnel is not the only critic of RFF. SNCF, France's state-owned train operator, has in recent years complained about the infrastructure owner's rail access charges.

Eurotunnel's comments came as it released a first-quarter trading update. Sales rose by more than a fifth, at constant currencies, to €225.5m, led by Europorte and standard shuttle services. Andrew Jones, an analyst at RBC Europe, said first-quarter trading appeared to be in line with expectations.

The group's short-term prospects got a boost earlier this week when the train operator Eurostar said it would focus on volume growth this summer rather than higher revenues per seat. Eurotunnel gets a fixed fee per passenger, so would benefit from that strategy's success.

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