

BREAKBULK SECTOR RESPONDS TO CRISIS

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Leading Operators Initiate Measures

Breakbulk firms from across the industry have announced new measures to meet the challenge of the current coronavirus outbreak and keep necessary services operating.

As many global trade routes close, demand for critical project cargo deliveries continues with many operators forced to operate reduced services and navigate increasingly complex border conditions.

“We remain responsive in our ocean operations and at this time see little impact on our schedules,” management at cargo line Wallenius Wilhelmsen said. “Going forward, service demand is unlikely to follow normal patterns as the spread of the coronavirus wanes in one area and accelerates in another, and we will adjust schedules and capacity accordingly.”

Breakbulk operators have announced a raft of measures including rigorous biosecurity processes, and have made operational changes such as avoiding crew change and shore leave, minimizing interpersonal exchanges in affected areas and introducing enhanced food safety and hygiene.

“We accept the weight of responsibility to provide trusted global services and connect the supply chains of our customers even during this unprecedented time of challenge,” cargo shipping line AAL said in a statement.

Active Measures

Key steps announced by operators include daily health and safety procedures for all staff, increased remote working or split working arrangements where staff need to be in offices, and quarantine directives for any staff showing symptoms.

“We are facing challenging times as we all prepare and respond to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak ... With such unknowns, the economic implications are also a concern. However, as companies, we have weathered many storms over the years,” said Rachel Crawford, head of breakbulk association the Project Cargo Network.

Engineering contractor Saipem faced the early brunt of the outbreak, as its home market of Italy led other regions in the world in terms of number of cases. The firm last month announced measures to ensure employees in affected areas of Italy self-isolate but noted that “given the peculiar nature of the management of projects for large-sized customers ... it is necessary, for the moment, to maintain the presence of a number of resources at certain locations.”

Ports Operate Reduced Services

Key breakbulk ports and hubs are largely continuing necessary services but have drastically reduced access for non-essential personnel as they seek to keep volumes flowing.

The Georgia Port Authority said it “is coordinating with federal, state and local partners including the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, along with other emergency and public health agencies,” and has “suspended travel for port employees, port tours and non-essential visitors.”

Likewise, authorities at the Port of Antwerp state they “are making it a priority to keep the port fully operational,” and “are working actively to prevent further spread of the coronavirus, with various measures [including] a cross-border, multi-sector taskforce set up with various partners to monitor the situation weekly.”

The European Union this week announced unprecedented measures to seal its borders to nearly all incomers for at least 30 days.