

O Come All Ye Freight-Full: Avalanche of Christmas goods to be delivered by rail freight this year

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New figures reveal that rail freight is set to play a key role in the run up to Christmas this year delivering millions of tonnes of festive goods to shops around the country. Almost a third of Tesco's Christmas range will reach their shelves by rail freight including a huge amount of Christmas crackers, trees and bottles of wine.

The supermarket giant is increasing the amount of goods they transport by rail freight to boost reliability and reduce emissions to help tackle the climate emergency and has announced a £5million investment in September in their new rail freight equipment. This year 30% of their Christmas products will be transported by rail 70% more than last year including:

- Nearly 8 million bottles of wine
- Over 350,000 Christmas crackers
- 80,000 Christmas trees
- Half a million boxes of lights
- Nearly 5 million gift wrapping accessories
- Around 1.5m boxes of decorations
- Over 1.5 million Christmas cards

Throughout the pandemic the railway played a vital role getting key workers where they were needed with rail freight keeping supermarkets stocked and power stations fuelled as more people worked from home. Now that COVID-19 will mean a very different Christmas for many people across the country, rail companies are working hard to ensure people have everything they need for the holidays.

Last month alone, freight trains have transported more than 1.6m tonnes of intermodal goods on almost 3,700 trains. This year, freight trains will deliver festive food, drink, decorations and toys across the country, and also transport the millions of Christmas cards sent to loved ones as well as the all-important letters to Father Christmas.

Robert Nisbet, Director of Nations and Regions for the Rail Delivery Group said: "It's been a challenging year for many people across Britain so we're happy that rail freight can play a central role in delivering Christmas cheer, ensuring families have everything they need to celebrate in style. With only a fraction of the emissions compared to road haulage, every tree, pudding and toy transported by rail is helping to make this a green Christmas."

The amount of intermodal freight transported has increased since last year and by almost 20% over the last decade delivering significant benefits for the environment. Each freight train can carry as many as 76 heavy goods vehicles with only a fraction of the emissions meaning a modal shift from road haulage to rail will not only help tackle the climate emergency but can help cut traffic jams too.

Chris Connelly, Managing Director for Direct Rail Services who operate rail freight transportation for Tesco said: "Every month we transport around 12,000 containers of vital goods across the country to ensure shelves are stocked and Christmas presents available.

"Using our state-of-the-art Class 88 locomotives we can move huge loads hundreds of miles and, when running on overhead electricity, with zero exhaust emissions, making it absolutely fantastic for the environment."

Rail Minister, Chris Heaton-Harris MP whose constituency Daventry contains the international rail freight terminal DIRFT said: "The sheer volume of festive goods that are currently being transported across the country daily is reflective of the crucial role that the rail freight industry plays at this time of year.

"Rail freight has been fundamental in ensuring that the country, and the economy, has kept moving through the pandemic, and I am thankful to everyone working so hard to keep Christmas on track."

Britain's new high-speed railway, HS2, is now under construction, and once complete it will provide

additional capacity on the existing network to grow the amount of goods transported by rail, alongside increasing local and regional passenger services. Building HS2 frees up a massive amount of space on the existing railway by placing fast inter-city passenger services on their own pair of tracks. Once HS2 is operating, trains on existing lines can run much closer together, meaning there will be more paths available for rail freight operators.

Mark Thurston, HS2 Ltd's CEO, said: "It is fantastic that more of what we eat, drink and gift each other at Christmas is now travelling by rail, removing lorries from our roads and reducing the amount of carbon emitted by transport. However, many of our major railway lines have already run out of room for more freight trains, so if we want to grow the amount of goods we move by rail we need to create more space for them.

"As well as offering low carbon journeys to hundreds of thousands of people every day, HS2 will also take pressure off the existing network for more local, regional and freight services. By unlocking much-needed capacity across the country, we can continue to see more freight travelling by cleaner, greener rail, as each tonne of freight transported by rail reduces carbon emissions by 76% compared to road."

Photo credit: Rail Delivery Group

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