

Timber freight train takes trip to sawmill for first time in 18 years

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An Abergavenny sawmill has taken in its first load of train-transported timber since 2004.

The development is a result of a partnership between Network Rail and Colas.

The timber was felled in a forest in Bickleigh, south Devon, before being loaded onto a Colas Rail freight train at Hackney Yard near Newton Abbot to be transported 92 miles to Pontrilas Timber in Abergavenny as part of a trial run.

If the trial proves successful, it could see the return of 'log trains' as a regular sight travelling on the railway along the south Devon coastline.

Pontrilas Timber, who wanted to explore the practicalities of moving timber by rail, is encouraged by the success of the pilot and hopes to work with Network Rail to produce a plan for carrying commercially viable loads, which would include improvements to the sidings and the adjacent road in Abergavenny.

During the pilot project, the freight train carried 320 tonnes of timber in eight wagons, with the aspiration

to more than double the load to 720 tonnes across 18 wagons in the future.

Transporting this much timber by rail removes 76 lorries from the road, helping both reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions. It is estimated that over 0.45 tonnes of carbon dioxide are saved by using the railway for this journey, which equates to 54,739 charges of a smartphone or the carbon emissions per passenger taking a one-way flight from Paris to New York.

The trial was made possible following Network Rail strengthening one of the bridges at Hackney Yard, increasing the weight limit of vehicles entering the yard to 44 tonnes. This increase means larger HGVs (Heavy Goods Vehicles) are now able to access the yard and load their cargo onto a freight train for transportation across the rest of the country via the rail network.

The strengthening of the bridge will also allow Aggregate Industries to use Hackney Yard to load freight for transportation to the south-east in the near future.

Jess Lippett, Network Rail senior route freight manager, said: "Rail freight is a vital part of our infrastructure, providing a fast, green, safe and efficient way of transporting goods.

"This trial run shows how we can work together to have a positive impact on the environment and the economy. The work to strengthen the bridge at Hackney Yard means that we can facilitate the movement of heavy goods across the country more effectively, a benefit that will last for years to come."

Simon Ball, Colas Rail UK freight director, said: "This is a great opportunity to expand our freight business, especially as we lead the field in the transportation of timber by rail.

"We provide a sustainable alternative by operating on rail, also reducing the number of HGVs on the road, especially during the shortage of drivers.

"Working with the client and Network Rail, I'm convinced that we can move forward and build on the success of the trial."