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Virginia port to test truck appointments in June

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Joseph Bonney, Senior Editor | Apr 17, 2015 2:29PM EDT

The Port of Virginia plans in June to start pilot testing of a trucker appointment system it hopes to eventually implement port-wide.

Initial tests will be small-scale, involving about a half dozen motor carriers, said Virginia Port Authority spokesman Joe Harris. He said port officials are heeding truckers' advice to proceed cautiously.

"We listened to them. We don't want to do anything that damages their business," Harris said. "The goal is to roll it out incrementally, checking at each step to make sure everything's correct. We want to make sure we get it right, and get it right the first time."

That caution is warranted, considering many drayage drivers' frustration with long turn times at the port's terminals. Strong volume — up 16 percent year-over-year in March — has strained operations at Hampton Road terminals and limited some drivers to one turn a day.

Virginia is among several ports looking to start or expand truck appointment systems as a way to provide a more predictable traffic flow. GCT Bayonne in the Port of New York and New Jersey also plans to introduce appointments this year.

Appointment systems are designed to provide terminals with advance notice on truck arrivals. The goal is to enable terminals to allocate labor and equipment more efficiently, sort containers for quick pickup, and reduce driver turn times.

Bigger ships and higher volumes have contributed to surges in truck visits at ports, producing congestion that slows turn times and prevents terminals from operating at full speed or capacity.

Advocates of truck appointments say smoothing the peaks and valleys of truck traffic will allow terminals to operate more efficiently and drayage drivers to be serviced more quickly.

Virginia's pilot tests this summer will be at Norfolk International Terminals. No completion date has been set. Port staff have been working with technology provider Advent to develop the system, which will be linked to NIT's terminal operating system.

The port's other main terminal, Virginia International Gateway, has had a voluntary appointment system for several years. Under the port's plan, that system eventually be replaced by the system being tested at NIT. The new system will require appointments by truckers.

Ed O'Callaghan, president of drayage company Century Express, said truckers would support appointments — but only after terminals can consistently offer shorter turn times than the several hours that some drivers now endure.

“We would hope the port would not open an appointment system in Virginia until the terminals can give us an inkling that we could get through that terminal within an hour or an hour in a half,” he said. “Until then, we feel we would be just clerks entering information for the terminal.”

Appointments were among numerous recommendations by a motor carrier task force the port authority organized last year to find solutions to congestion and long turn times O'Callaghan co-chaired the task force's working group on appointments.

The working group recommended an appointment system, but O'Callaghan said it should come only after implementation of other task force recommendations on infrastructure, equipment and terminal operations.

“Invest in infrastructure, add equipment, and implement the other recommendations to reduce turn times to a reasonable level. Then bring in the appointment system as a mechanism to get turn times to where they need to be,” he said.

Harris said the port authority is sensitive to trucker concerns and determined to ensure that appointments' benefits are widely shared. “We're taking our time,” he said. “We know that the port and the motor carrier community must benefit from it.”

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