Overland transport

Transferring goods to the railways: This is the principle of the Overland Transport Agreement between Switzerland and the EU. The European Union accepts the Swiss heavy goods vehicle tax (HGV tax). By so doing, it recognises the Swiss policy of transferring freight from road to rail. In return, Switzerland has raised the weight limit for heavy goods vehicles to 40 metric tonnes.

The Overland Transport Agreement between Switzerland and the EU is an important cornerstone of Swiss transport policy. The aim is to transport as much freight as possible by rail, thus protecting the environment – above all in the Alps. In 1994, the Swiss electorate anchored this principle in the constitution by voting yes to the Alpine Initiative. The EU recognised the principle of moving from road to rail by signing the Overland Transport Agreement five years later.

A central aspect of the Agreement is the heavy goods vehicle tax. This tax is levied on all heavy goods vehicles travelling on Swiss roads. In accordance with the polluter-pays principle, it is based on the distance travelled, the weight and emissions. Since 2009, the average fee is 325 francs for a 40-tonne vehicle travelling a distance of 300 kilometres (e.g. Basel-Chiasso). A large part of the proceeds is invested in the New Transalpine Rail Link (NEAT). The opening of the Lötschberg Tunnel in 2007 marked the completion of an initial stage; the Gotthard Basis Tunnel should be completed by 2017. This will increase the capacity for transferring goods to the railways and should further encourage the transfer.

Under the Agreement, Switzerland raised the weight limit for heavy goods vehicles from the previous 28 metric tonnes to the EU level of 40 metric tonnes. This means that fewer heavy goods vehicles are required for the same quantity of goods. At the same time, transport markets in road and rail traffic were opened to a major extent – with the exception of rail passenger travel. Certain standards, such as access to the profession of road transport operator, have been harmonised to enable the liberalisation of transport.

For the railways, the Agreement means improved access to the rail networks of the other EU countries. This benefits companies that combine road and rail transport (heavy goods vehicles and containers that are loaded onto the railway).

Less heavy goods traffic in the Alps

Since the introduction of the HGV tax in 2001, the rapid increase in heavy goods vehicles crossing the Alps has been stopped. In 2008, the railway's share of freight traffic crossing the Alps was 64%. This high level is unique in comparison with other Alpine countries. Without this transfer policy, roughly 500,000 more heavy goods vehicles would travel through the Swiss Alps per year (status 2006). Overall, 1.275 million (status 2008) heavy goods vehicles cross the Alps each year, 9.2% less than prior to the introduction of the HGV tax in 2000.

Key data

Date of signing: 21 June 1999 (in the framework of Bilaterals I)

Approval by the electorate: 21 May 2000 (in the framework of Bilaterals I)

Date effective: 1 June 2002

"Through the Overland Transport Agreement, the EU recognises the Swiss aim of transfer. In addition, the preconditions have been created for further steps in the liberalisation of the rail freight traffic market. The Agreement is an important basis for the competitiveness of Swiss rail freight traffic and allows as many goods as possible to reach their destination by rail."

Andreas Meyer, CEO of Swiss Federal Railways (SBB)