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The polar vortex didn't put the U.S. into a deep freeze for long, but the widespread chill is still causing transportation problems for shippers, railroads and drayage truckers. Those problems may be contributing to stronger-than-usual business for over-the-road truckers.

The cold snap hit some transportation networks at stress points, and resultant delays are a warning of what could happen if freight demand were to rise more quickly in 2014.

In addition to problems related to the cold weather, train derailments, port backlogs and what appears to be higher than usual general freight demand in January are testing transportation networks and shipping capacity.

Drayage drivers in the Chicago area hit with record freezing temperatures have grappled with malfunctioning rigs, delaying the pick-up and drop-offs of loads at intermodal rail terminals and shippers' distribution centers, said Jason Hilsenbeck, president of LoadMatch & Drayage.com.

The cold has also hampered diesel-fueled cranes at intermodal terminals. The lack of extended ramp storage, along with a shortage of chassis, has also frustrated drayage drivers, he said.

The railroads and terminal operators want to get the containers out of the terminal, and that results in containers sitting on chassis. "But drivers can't handle new boxes if they don't have free chassis," Hilsenbeck said.

As a result, shipments piled up, and some shippers reportedly are diverting freight away from intermodal rail to avoid delays.

"We're hearing from customers that they're pulling freight off rail and trucking it temporarily to recoup lost time," said John White, chief marketing officer of U.S. Xpress Enterprises, the fourth-largest truckload carrier.

"The congestion in Chicago was among the worst some customers have seen," White said. At the same time, truck demand throughout the U.S. "is still fairly robust" for January, he said.

On the East Coast, bad weather and backlogs from the holidays combined to slow pickups and deliveries of containers and cause long turn times for drayage drivers this month at the Port of New York and New Jersey.

Long lines of trucks were waiting when terminals reopened Jan. 2. Terminals that continued to handle ships while truck gates operated on reduced holiday schedules started the new year with a large backlog of import cargo.

During the height of the congestion, some drivers waited 10 hours or more to pick up or deliver containers, and turn times of five to six hours were common. Delays were aggravated by a blizzard that closed the port's terminals on Jan. 6.

Unexpected problems continued this week. Work at terminals was briefly disrupted Wednesday morning by dense fog, and on Thursday morning by computer problems at APM Terminals.

Terminals at the East Coast's busiest port have struggled with frequent delays since last summer, when a combination of computer problems, seasonal longshore labor shortages and construction produced several weeks of gridlock.

The port's four busiest container terminals — Maher, APM, Port Newark Container Terminal, and Global Terminal — plan to stay open Monday during the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday to clear cargo backlogs. That will mean paying overtime, as the day is an International Longshoremen's Association holiday.

The challenges at ports and inland terminals are only part of the problem facing shippers. Rail service appears to have deteriorated in recent weeks, with mid-December average train speeds down 6.2 percent year-over-year, said Larry Gross, a senior consultant for FTR Associates.

He said the average terminal dwell time was up 8.9 percent in the same period.

“As train speeds slow there are various knock-on effects as crews, locomotives and cars become less productive, so you need more of them,” Gross said. “Once a downward trend is established it is a negative spiral and can be difficult to address.”

In the week ending Jan. 11, U.S. railroads’ intermodal traffic was down 6.7 percent year-over-year, and carloadings fell 8.2 percent year-over-year.

The rail industry will likely regain its footing, as there is generally a volume slowdown in the midst of winter, giving the carriers “some breathing room,” Gross said. Further inclement weather, however, could slow carriers’ efforts to restore their service levels. Colder than normal temperatures are predicted for the last weeks of January.

The larger question is whether railroads will be able to keep service levels high if the economic recovery accelerates as many economists forecast. Encouragingly, the freight spikes and dips that have marked the nation’s slow economic recovery have given them time to fine-tune their operations, Gross said.

— *Senior Editors Mark Szakonyi, Joseph Bonney and William B. Cassidy contributed to this story.*

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