



A Midyear Check-In on Transportation & Logistics: The Market Is Following the Predicted Script, Just Unevenly

When Lincoln International spoke with [Lee Clair of Transportation and Logistics Advisors, LLC](#) last fall, the [transportation and logistics \(T&L\) market](#) was still working through an unusually long freight downturn, tariff headlines were dominating the trade conversation and many observers expected either a rapid decline in imports or a near-term reshoring surge. Lee's view was more nuanced: imports were unlikely to disappear, domestic production would take time to rebuild, exports would show strength and would likely begin with commodities the U.S. already produces at scale and tariff-driven disruption would likely appear more in changing trade lanes, modal mix and import transport flows rather than in an immediate domestic manufacturing boom. As such, Lee's outlook for the T&L sector was that demand tied to imports would likely remain relatively stable, domestic transport would stabilize or grow slowly and export-related transport demand would begin improving gradually, led first by low-value, high-weight commodities.

Halfway through 2026, that viewpoint is aging well. As many of the government metrics have a delay, the clearest scorecard is rail, which has weekly up-to-date data. Year-to-date AAR data shows U.S. rail traffic in positive territory, with carloads leading the improvement and intermodal roughly stable to modestly positive. This is important, as rail has had a decades-long trend of being flat to a very slow decline. More important than any single weekly, or even the year-to-date number, is the composition of the gains: strength has broadened beyond consumer import boxes into freight-intensive categories such as grain, metallic ores and metals, chemicals, petroleum-related traffic and other industrial commodities. That is exactly where Lee expected the earliest evidence of recovery to appear.

The import story has also played out closer to Lee's view than to the most alarmist tariff scenarios. Imports have been affected, but they have not collapsed. The more meaningful change is not import volume versus no import volume; it is where imports originate and how they move. U.S. trade data has shown record, or near-record, import activity from several non-China sourcing markets, including Mexico, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia. At the same time, imports from China and several legacy or tariff-sensitive origins, including Canada, Germany, Japan, India and parts of Europe, are down versus last year's front-loaded pace. That is consistent with the trade-lane reshuffling Lee anticipated: tariff pressure is not eliminating trade, but it is changing sourcing decisions, origin markets and the transportation networks needed to support them.

For ports, drayage providers, ocean carriers and forwarders, this distinction matters. Flat aggregate import volume can still create a very different operating environment underneath

the surface. A shipment that shifts from China to Vietnam or Thailand may require different sailing schedules, different transload strategies, different customs support, different cross-border capacity and different inland routing. This is why flexible networks and consultative forwarders are likely to be advantaged over providers built primarily around repetitive, low-cost transaction processing in legacy lanes.

Exports are the second major validation point. Lee argued that near-term export growth would emerge and would likely come from products the U.S. already has the capacity to produce and move, including grain, coal, chemicals, food products, petroleum-related products and other commodities. The early evidence points in that direction. The same BEA and Census data that shows imports slightly below last year's front-loaded pace also shows exports materially higher year-to-date, with March exports of goods and services and exports of goods both reaching record levels. The mix matters for T&L: recent export strength has included industrial supplies and materials, petroleum-related products, foods, feeds and beverages and soybeans, all categories that generate meaningful demand for rail, barge, port, bulk, drayage and transload capacity.

That does not mean every farmer, shipper, forwarder or carrier is benefiting equally. Lee made that point in the original discussion as well: minimal change at the aggregate level can still mask major winners and losers underneath. Soybeans, for example, remain highly sensitive to Chinese buying patterns, while grain, coal, chemicals, petroleum products and industrial materials each move through different corridors, assets and service providers. The headline is not uniform prosperity; it is that freight tied to exports and bulk commodities has become more important to the T&L outlook.

The domestic freight market is also behaving in the way Lee anticipated. Tariffs have not produced an immediate reshoring-driven truckload boom. Instead, the impact has been indirect: changing trade lanes, supporting specific intermodal and rail flows, creating volatility for ports and forwarders and putting pressure on supply chains to become more flexible. For the domestic market, ATA-based truck tonnage and FRED freight indicators are good directional reference datasets. The BTS / FRED Truck Tonnage Index, which is calculated from ATA monthly truck tonnage reports, moved higher in early 2026, and broader FRED freight transportation data also improved. Those indicators still have limits: ATA-based tonnage does not fully capture grain and agricultural movements or private fleets. Even with those caveats, the direction is encouraging. Demand appears to have stopped deteriorating and is beginning to grow slowly.

The other side of the equation is supply. The market spent the last several years creating excess capacity, especially in truckload, where the supply problem was driven less by the number of trucking companies than by the number of available drivers chasing freight. That excess is now bleeding out slowly while demand is beginning to firm. When supply is moving down gradually and demand is moving up

gradually, the recovery can become meaningful for well-run domestic transportation service providers, even before the broader market feels like a boom.

There is also a structural tailwind for larger, more professional operators. The recent Supreme Court ruling allowing a negligent-hiring claim against a freight broker to proceed is likely to increase the importance of carrier vetting, safety records, compliance infrastructure and disciplined procurement. Practically, that should favor larger carriers with credible safety programs and third-party logistics providers with robust carrier-management processes. It may also widen the gap between providers that can document quality and compliance and those that compete only on spot capacity and price. This is likely to also add pressure to reduce capacity as the lower-quality drivers and trucklines get squeezed out.

Less than halfway through the year, the lesson is clear: the better viewpoint was not to assume a straight-line recovery or a simple tariff shock. The better framework was to expect resilient but shifting import flows, gradual export growth in freight-intensive commodities, meaningful trade-lane disruption, a slowly improving domestic freight market and an eventual tightening of supply-demand balance.

That is the market we are seeing. Barring a material geopolitical or energy shock, the setup for T&L is increasingly favorable. Rail and intermodal are already benefiting from imports, exports and commodities. Domestic freight indicators are turning in the right direction. Capacity is being rationalized. Safety, compliance and network quality are becoming more important. For transportation and logistics leaders and investors, the question is no longer simply whether freight demand is up or down. The better questions are where freight is moving, which commodities are driving growth, which trade lanes are gaining share and which providers have the flexibility, compliance discipline and network depth to win as the recovery broadens.