



An uncertain road

When it comes to freight rates, the future is always in motion

Trucks wait their turn to be loaded at a loading dock at Bizon Nursery in Hubbard, Oregon. Shipping prices have come down from their COVID-era highs. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

BY JON BELL

There was a time, about five years ago — back in the heyday of COVID — when nursery stock was flying off the benches as fast as could be. Growers were shipping plants across the country however they could: trucks, rail, refers, you name it.

Rail transportation, despite some of its flaws in terms of delays and long shipping times, was flourishing simply because plants needed to be moved. A new crop of drivers looking to tap into the rush pulled up and cashed in.

“It was absolutely crazy,” said Erica Hill, director of intermodal services at Independent Dispatch, a Portland, Oregon-based freight forwarding company. “Everybody was using any kind of intermodal box they could get their hands on.”

With every boom, however, comes a bust. The super strong nursery craze persisted for a couple years while COVID worked its way through the country, but it eventually leveled off. Sales tapered; so did demand for shipping, until trends dropped back to pre-COVID-boom-time.

“If we ever get the COVID numbers again, it’ll be a miracle,” said Willy Wachtveitl, a freight broker with **Integrity Logistics** in Wilsonville, Oregon.

These days, shipping has definitely mellowed out for the nursery industry. There have been a few lows and a few highs over the past year, but nothing too dramatic — and that appears to be how the road ahead will unfold as well.

Cheap and plenty

Though the COVID boom has retreated, there are still some lingering impacts that can be felt today. For starters, trucks are cheap for shipping.

“A truck is \$3,000, \$4,000 or even \$5,000 cheaper right now than it was in the peak of COVID,” Wachtveitl said.

Hill said she has seen that firsthand impacts of that on intermodal transport.

“Intermodal has been struggling to compete against trucks because they are so cheap right now,” she said. “Really for the last two years for intermodal rail service, there’s been a deficit of shipments just because trucks are so cheap. It’s been

a bummer for us.”

Part of that has to do with supply and demand. During COVID, lots of new drivers entered the pool. A lot of them are still in it, even though demand for shipping has dropped off.

“The pandemic brought a large influx of new motor carrier authorities,” said Charlie Hall, Ph.D. and Ellison Chair in International Floriculture at Texas A&M University. “Even after a prolonged shake-out, the active carrier base remains larger than in early 2020, which has kept capacity relatively loose.”

While that’s not ideal for shippers, it works well for nurseries who’ve got goods to move because shipping rates are low — well below 2021–22 peaks, according to Hall.

Slower sales

Although nursery sales have trimmed down since the pandemic, they remain fairly steady. Hall reported in his “State of the Industry” update at Cultivate’25 that top-line sales so far in 2025 were up compared to 2024 for nearly 80% of growers. The vast majority are also seeing higher >>

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sales numbers than they did in 2019 — pre-COVID — but only about half have had an increase in the number of units sold; the other half have seen a decrease.

Dale Parra, a freight broker with **Truck Transportation Services** in Wilsonville, has noticed that this year.

“We are seeing smaller orders from the vendors,” he said. “I think people are playing it conservative. They’re worried about the economy and don’t want to over-buy. It was a bad spring in the north-east and Midwest too. There was lots of rain, and I think that had an impact.”

Indeed, the larger economic picture has also been impacting sales and shipping.

“I think the constant chaos makes people a little more cautious,” Parra said.

Policy changes at the federal level have created a lot of uncertainty, particularly when it comes to costs, labor and other factors. And, of course, the tariffs »



Antonio Moreno loads a pallet of trees into an awaiting truck at Bizon Nursery. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL



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still have everyone on edge. “Tariff headlines in 2025 have injected noise into shipper behavior, which can whipsaw capacity and rates short-term,” Hall said. “Tariffs can also lift landed costs on imported inputs.”

Good to go

As the fall shipping season approached, Parra said he expected a slight jump in rates, but nothing dramatic. Trucks will likely continue to be available and less expensive than rail, at least for the time being. Hill said she understands why many who ship go the truck route — it’s usually much faster than rail and, for now anyways, the cost difference between trucks and rail is negligible.

“A lot of times it’s just not worth it or there’s not a big enough savings for customers to switch to rail,” she said.

However, if fuel prices continue to rise, intermodal freight becomes more attractive >>

Intermodal shipping has been struggling to compete with low trucking prices. PHOTO BY IAN DEWAR PHOTOGRAPHY

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Trucks wait their turn to be loaded at Bizon Nursery. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

because trains use less fuel than trucks. Hill also said that railroads seem to have improved in terms of avoiding delays and running consistently, which might have turned off some customers during the pandemic.

“The good news is the railroads are all running well and service is back to normal,” she said, “but there’s just not as much moving these days.”

In addition, she said some railroads and container services that once may have shied away from nursery stock because it was perceived as messy or dirty freight have changed their tune and are more willing to ship it now.

As for the busy spring 2026 shipping season, Parra said he’s optimistic that it will be a good one.

“We’ll just see how the orders play out, but it should be good,” he said.

Drastic movements by the Trump administration could cause some market turmoil and impact shipping lanes, so it’s hard to predict how even the next few months will pan out. But there’s one way nurseries can help make things easier for themselves — planning ahead.

“The most important thing on all of it is, the more advance notice to ship it, the better the rate will end up being,” Wachtveitl said.

Even a week or two of notice is helpful, he added.

“Two weeks out to get an appointment to even send a truck in makes a big difference,” Wachtveitl said. “It makes it easier for the nurseries. It makes it easier for the truck. It makes it makes it easier on everyone. And the easier I can make it, the better off I like it.” ☺

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is JBellInk.com.

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