



Rough seas for freight

Higher fuel expenses and tight capacity make shipping more difficult and expensive

This season has been beset with higher fuel costs, higher demand for drivers and higher enforcement of federal regulations. PHOTO BY KRISTINA

BY JON BELL

If there were to be a theme for nursery shipping in 2026, it may very well be higher.

Higher demand for more drivers.

Higher enforcement of federal regulations.

Higher usage of rail.

And, most prominently, higher fuel costs and prices.

“We definitely saw rates increase from last year and even kind of progressively increase a little bit throughout the spring season,” said John Miller, sales manager for **Rosewoods Transportation Inc.**, a transportation broker in Washougal, Washington that specializes in nursery products. “It was in the midst of the spring season when the fuel hike really hit us. We’ve seen the rates continue to increase, and now (mid-September), we’re shipping some fall nursery, and all across the board the rates are still higher than

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— Erica Hill

DIRECTOR OF INTERMODAL SERVICES AT
INDEPENDENT TRUCK DISPATCH INC.

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While it may be straightforward to say higher shipping rates are the biggest factor at play in the 2026 shipping season, there are, of course, other pieces to the puzzle. Brokers have seen them all ebb

and flow before, lending to the cyclical sway that determines how Oregon’s nursery products make their way across the country — and how much it will cost to get them there.

But even if some of this feels familiar, some of it is entirely new territory.

“We’ve seen a lot of ups and downs over the over the years, and things go in cycles where it gets a little tougher, then it gets a little easier as far as the trucking side of things,” Miller said. “Right now, we’re just in a season where it’s a little bit more difficult than it has been the past couple of years, but it’s also something that we haven’t faced before. We’ll get through it. We still have to get their products from point A to point B.”

Dire straits

By far the biggest factor driving higher shipping costs this year is the steep rise in fuel prices. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, die-»

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sel hit \$6.53 per gallon on September 21, up \$2.78 or more than 40% from a year ago — the highest it's ever been.

On the West Coast, it was even worse. Diesel landed at \$7.55 a gallon, almost \$3 more than a year ago. The biggest reason for the increase: the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz due to the U.S. war with Iran.

"The Iran war has caused diesel fuel prices to soar, so carrier fuel surcharges are astronomical," said Erica Hill, director of intermodal services at **Independent Dispatch Inc.**, a Portland-based freight forwarding company. "JB Hunt's fuel surcharges this week (Sept. 19) are 124% for truck and 62% for intermodal, which are in line with most carriers. I've been in the industry over 30 years and have never seen fuel surcharges this high — it's crazy!"

Other factors have made 2026 a challenging shipping year as well. For start-



On the West Coast, diesel is up almost \$3 more than last year. PHOTO BY DECE STD

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ers, there's always the aging workforce issue and low recruitment numbers in the trucking industry. In the past year-and-a-half, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has also begun cracking down on drivers with non-domiciled Commercial Driver Licenses. Those are issued to individuals who are legally permitted to work in the U.S. but who are not considered permanent residents, such as agricultural workers and temporary non-agricultural workers.

Some of those drivers may have overstayed their time in the U.S. but continued to drive. The current administration, however, has worked with states to put an end to that.

Additionally, there has been more enforcement of the English language proficiency requirements for drivers, who are required to speak, read and understand English at a certain level. For years, federal guidance did not recommend that violators be put out of service. The current administration has ended that guidance and now takes those who can't meet a proficiency assessment out of service.

"It definitely results in fewer drivers," said Joel Mandel, operations manager, West Coast, for **Northland Express Transport**, a third-party logistics company whose corporate office is in Grand Haven, Michigan. "Between those regulatory things, we're talking thousands and thousands of drivers, not just hundreds."

Get a load

As for the fallout from all these factors, the main one is increased costs to ship nursery goods out of the state. Mandel said loads have been running close to \$1,000 more per load than in 2025, which has caused a bit of sticker shock. He saw that play out in a decrease in the number of reorders earlier this year. Normally, customers will order products for March, April and May and then reorder for later months. Not so much this year.

"I just didn't see a lot of those reorders come in," Mandel said. "You know, they're not used to getting an \$8,000 bill, when the previous year they got a >>

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\$7,000 bill. That's tough to reconcile."

Miller, too, said he thinks shipping costs year-to-date are probably up anywhere between 15% and 25% compared to the same time last year.

"It's pretty considerable," he said. "It could be up to as high as 30% more in certain areas."

Fewer drivers have made availability more of an issue, but Miller said that didn't have huge impacts on the shipping scene this year. It may have created a more competitive environment and given trucking companies and drivers more flexibility in what loads they wanted to prioritize, but in the end, plants still got shipped.

"At the end of the day, drivers have got to keep the trucks moving," Miller said.

The higher shipping costs have led to price increases for nursery products. They've also motivated some nurseries

and brokers to consider other ways to move their plants — namely via railroad. That mode of transportation has historically been only negligibly more affordable than trucks, but these days it's noticeably cheaper and prices are often more certain.

"We are getting a lot of interest in converting from over the road to intermodal rail service," Hill said.

Driving ahead

While 2026 has proven to be a challenging year for shipping, not all the news was gloomy. Mandel said there's solace to be found in the cyclical nature of the business, and that while it may be choppy waters at the moment, smooth sailing is bound to return.

"It's not necessarily the first time where we've seen an adjustment made," he said. "We'll probably see a future

adjustment, which is going to stabilize costs or lower rates."

One potential effect? With rates high, more drivers are likely to enter the workforce. The added capacity could help drive rates down, which is what played out after the COVID boom.

"Rates started going down the past few years," Mandel said. "Now they're climbing back up again, and that might actually spark some people to get back in the driver's seat."

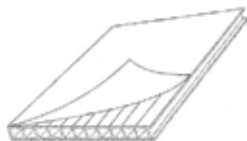
He added, however, that before that happens, more drivers might continue exiting the industry if costs for fuel, maintenance and insurance remain high.

Miller said that despite the bumpy road this year, driver reliability has remained solid and the pool of drivers available continues to be filled with high-quality folks. »

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"We rely heavily on good, long-standing relationships, and so, despite everything that's going on, we still have our regular carriers that we've been working with for decades," he said. "Our best drivers are still willing to take our loads and do the nursery loads to kind of maintain that loyalty, which I think is a high point, because it can be very easy to have people run the other direction, when things get crazy."

More of the same

As for the future and next year's shipping season, nothing is certain, especially given the current political and international climate. Miller said to expect continued high shipping rates, and Mandel said it would be wise for nurseries to build in a little more cushion for shipping costs.

"I would prepare for it not to get any better," he said. He added that it's important for nurseries to maintain relationships they have with reliable brokers they can count on, "especially if you know they will do a good job for you."

Hill said diesel prices will remain high as long as the Strait of Hormuz remains closed, which will continue to constrain capacity and push prices. But she did offer some practical advice to nurseries who are starting to size up the year ahead.

"Diversify your provider base and strengthen your existing carrier relationships now for better shipping coverage next spring," she said. "Lock in pricing and capacity using equipment commitment programs now to ensure an allocated supply of containers when you need them most." ☺

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.