

New container design boosts Unit 45's market share



DUTCH 45 ft container specialist Unit45 has reported an increasing interest in the use of 45 ft palletwide reefer containers, particularly from Spanish operators, writes Helen Hill.

Unit45 managing director Jan Koolen says the advent of new designs of reefer container able to load 32 or even 33 pallets is enabling intermodal operators to secure an increasing share of the market.

As the cost of operating trucks escalates — for a host of reasons including drivers' hours restrictions, the increasing cost of fuel and the introduction of road charging systems such as the German LKW Maut — intermodal alternatives using rail and shortsea shipping become more competitive.

An increasing number of shortsea carriers also means the frequency of sailings is much improved, while ports are now able to process intra-European containers much more swiftly.

This means door-to-door transit times are not lagging that far behind those achieved by trailers, especially over the longer distances.

Mr Koolen says Unit45 is talking to a number of Spanish companies regarding 45 ft reefers and has confirmed orders from transport operators JSV Logistic and Contegal. It has appointed Reftrade Sistemas de Refrigeración, the Spanish subsidiary of a Dutch company Reftrade, to represent it in Spain.

JSV Logistic was formed in 1995 specifically to exploit the then new design of 20 ft double-decked container that was able to carry 28 Euro-pallets.

This box was targeted specifically at fragile cargoes that could not be stacked.

Over the past 10 years, JSV has focused on developing new container designs to suit special cargo needs and it now has 20 different types including

21 ft, 41 ft and 43 ft units in its portfolio. JSV's total fleet now stands at around 3,000.

JSV is buying 12 diesel-electric powered pallet-wide reefer containers from Unit45, each capable of loading 32 pallets, to be used to transport bananas between the Canary Islands and Spain.

In business for more than 40 years, Contegal specialises in the multimodal transport of refrigerated and frozen cargo. Well known throughout the Spanish market, especially in the Canary Islands, it also operates international services to Mauritania, the Cape Verde Islands and the Mediterranean.

The main focus of its international expansion is being directed towards North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Contegal already operates 20 ft and 40 ft reefer containers, the latter being able to carry 23 or 24 pallets, as well as 45 ft reefer swapbodies.

Now, however, it has purchased its first 45 ft palletwide reefers, ordering five from Unit45. These again are fitted with diesel electric refrigeration units but can load 33 pallets rather than 32.

Contegal plans to use the new 45 ft containers to replace some of its 45 ft swapbodies. Containers have an advantage over swapbodies in that they can be top-lifted and stacked when loaded, making them far more suitable for multi-modal operations, especially when there is the option to use lift-on, lift-off container services.

CMA CGM subsidiary MacAndrews is also interested in 45 ft palletwide reefers as it seeks to expand its role in the carriage of fresh produce and has been trying out a number of Unit45's own fleet of containers on its shipping routes between Spain and Britain.

The successful completion of these first phase trials, which concentrated on product outturn quality and transit

time and included shipments of lettuce, broccoli, apples, pears, mandarins, lemons and onions, have confirmed MacAndrews' belief that it can offer a viable ocean freight alternative to overland reefer trucks moving from Iberia.

MacAndrews is now making incremental increases to the size of its 45 ft pallet-wide reefer fleet and trying to convince category managers in the fresh produce sector to transfer a proportion of their truck movements to its seaborne options before it makes a significant investment in a dedicated pool of 45 ft pallet-wide reefers.

Unit45 now owns 65 45 ft reefers including 35 new all-electric containers that are due to arrive in Europe soon, having been built by MCI in China.

These, too, are able to load 33 pallets but rely on an external diesel generator, usually chassis-mounted, when being trucked.

Mr Koolen says that Unit45 would like to see a super-slim unit that would make it possible to keep the whole refrigeration plant safely mounted within the end frame of a 33-pallet unit.

"With the current 33-pallet container the refrigeration unit extends outside the 45 ft envelope," he says. "While this is still legal for motorways in Europe, we recognise there is an increased risk of damage during handling."

"However, such is the competitive nature of European transport that our customers are prepared to take that small risk."

"Although the difference between 32 and 33 pallets may not seem that significant, 13.6 m road trailers are able to load 33 pallets too."

"We want to help our customers take more trucks off the road and that means we have to provide the equipment that can compete with road transport on equal terms."