

### FUEL PRICES FORCE SEA CHANGE IN IMPORTING



➤ “The situation remains bleak.” That’s how Giovanni Bisignani, director general and CEO of the International Air Transport Association, described the air cargo industry’s financial position. Bisignani told Air Cargo News in early September that the combination of high oil prices and falling demand is predicted to result in a \$5.2 billion loss to the air cargo industry this year.

The floral industry feels the petro pinch with every step from the field to the customer’s doorstep. Importers are looking for alternatives to transporting product via planes and some are finding options at sea.

According to the American Association of Port Authorities, by 2020, the total volume of cargo shipped by water is expected to be double that of 2001 levels.

Transporting flowers by ship is cheaper and, some experts contend, better for flowers. Its success, however, ultimately depends on all elements of the supply chain coming together to improve seaports and calm fears.

Terril A. Nell, Ph.D., AAF, of University of Florida at Gainesville, says although fruits and vegetables are regularly transported on sea vessels, sending flowers by boat is still in its infancy, and feedback from companies involved remains scarce. “I don’t think anyone is doing it with enough regularity,” he says. “But, the technology, the capability, is all there to make it work — and work well.”

When Esprit Miami experimented twice with transporting flowers by ship in the 1990s, the flowers arrived healthy, says Christine Martindale, the importer’s president. But not enough growers shipped enough product to arrive daily, and because bringing in product by airplanes was still affordable, the importer went back to air transport. Today’s economic pressures, however, have Martindale ready to reconsider ships — if more research and consumer education are done to make it a viable, trusted alternative.

George Staby, Ph.D., professor of horticulture and founder of the Chain of Life Network, has studied ship transports since 1981 and says now is the time to expand sea transport to keep flowers at prices consumers will buy. He recently took that call-to-action global, championing the alternative on a seminar tour that began this fall. “If this is going to be successful — and it’s been a long time coming — things need to happen within the next year or so,” Staby says.

#### Will Cooler Heads Prevail?

A key barrier to wider acceptance is a psychological one, Staby says. “Some buyers don’t think [the flowers] will do very well,” he explains. “They’ll say, ‘My flowers are two weeks old when I get them.’ Research shows that if you go within the recommended ranges of species, varieties, etc., it can be just as good as air transport, if not better.”

But skepticism in the marketplace persists, as customers wonder how their precious, perishable cargo can last the eight- to 10-day journey from South America to North America. Staby insists that the intermodal containers used on ships keep product fresh, emphasizing his point with this endorsement: “There isn’t a better refrigeration system in the world than intermodal containers.”

The containers, commonly used to transport perishables, have bottom-air delivery and powerful fans that allow for uniform air and temperature distribution, temperature accuracy and better humidity maintenance — none of which is available when transporting products on airplanes, Staby says.

Another advantage of the sealed containers is their ability to administer anti-ethylene, fungicide and other gas-related treatments.

But not all varieties are sea-worthy. Staby notes that while the 21- to 29-day ship trip from South America to Europe is safe for carnations, it could threaten roses and other cuts with shorter shelf lives.

To counteract the misconceptions about sea transport, all segments of the floral industry must speak with a united voice, Staby says. And he already has a plan to get them on the same page. He’s drafting a proposal to make the outreach more targeted, the education more accessible and the journey as smooth and safe as possible for flowers. 🌿

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### GETTING THE GOVERNMENT ONBOARD

**The industry needs to do more than change the minds of buyers about sea transport, it needs to educate the U.S. government about flowers, says George Staby, Ph.D., professor of horticulture and founder of the Chain of Life Network, who has studied ship transports since 1981.**

**The majority of U.S. seaports are not prepared to handle flowers, Staby says of the more than 150 points of entry. “For flowers to be successful, you have to work with the right government agencies responsible for the agricultural inspections,” he says.**

**Training more government agencies to conduct proper inspections is the first step. The U.S. must also have facilities to fumigate product and a way to redistribute the flowers.**

**Airports, such as Miami International Airport and Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, have imported flowers for decades, so the infrastructure is in place, Staby says. — K.K.**