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Logistics pipes up over Brexit cliff edge

Following the British General Election in May the UK's logistics industry is sensing its chance to make its voice heard as Brexit negotiations get under way.

For most of the past year Prime Minister Theresa May placed more weight on placating the extremists within the ruling Conservative Party by promising a drastic reduction in immigration and escaping the European Court of Justice than the concerns of businesses worried about the economic cliff edge of a hard Brexit.

She then called a snap election gambling on winning a larger majority to reinforce her mandate, and failed! Now dependent on a small number of MPs from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the mood has changed. Polls suggest that most UK citizens favour a softer Brexit; remaining in the EU's Customs Union and getting the best possible access to the Single Market.

If prior to the election Mrs May paid little attention to wider business voices, she totally ignored the concerns of the estimated 63,000 companies that employ 1.7 million people in Britain's logistics sector (which accounts for about 5 percent of GDP).

But with her credibility severely damaged after the election, trade associations representing hauliers, freight forwarders, ports and the like are at last finding their voice.

James Hookham, deputy chief executive of the Freight Transport Association (FTA) expressed serious dismay that the sector looked like being overlooked once again in planning for Brexit.

Economic lifeblood

"Logistics is the blood supply that keeps the other parts of the economy fit and healthy," he said. "When discussing how trading relationships will operate during and after Brexit it is vital that logistics has a seat at the table. Without it, Britain will find it difficult to keep trading effectively."

FTA's members operate more than 200,000 lorries, almost half of the UK fleet, as well as consigning 70 percent of the nation's visible air and sea exports, and delivering more than 90 percent of freight moved by rail. Hookham continued that for the UK economy to ensure maximum productivity post-Brexit, it was imperative that the concerns of the logistics sector are included in ongoing trade negotiations, rather than viewed as an afterthought once other negotiations have concluded.

"So many industries rely on the efficient and timely delivery of materials, components and time-sensitive items to ensure that they can keep trading. Yet these lifelines for business will be cut off if the needs of the logistics sector are not taken into account when forging new trading arrangements," he continued. "Our members have legitimate concerns about whether a frictionless trade deal with Europe will be possible in the post-Brexit world, and it is imperative that government takes these issues seriously if Britain is to continue as a leading player in the European, and global, marketplace."

In particular, FTA is asking government to consider five key areas identified by its members as crucial to the nation's future trading success.

First, Customs systems and procedures need to be in place that are capable of handling up to 300 million additional annual declarations.

Second, time needs to be allowed for the sector to adapt to new systems which will be required for UK-EU Customs declarations – something that has not been required since the UK entered the EU.

Third, equivalent procedures need to be introduced in all other European Customs administrations to avoid intra-EU border delays. Fourth, checks on vehicles need to be avoided at ports and airports, where there is "no time and no room".

Finally, transitional arrangements "must be robust enough" to cope with a round-the-clock industry, particularly if negotiations break down at short notice, and the UK exits the Customs Union without a deal.

"No trade deal will succeed until freight and logistics arrangements have been considered as part of the wider conversation, and we urge the government to include the sector as part of any future trade discussions," said Hookham. "Without it, Britain's trading relationships could grind to a halt."

Fit for purpose?

Responding to the publication of a National Audit Office (NAO) report on the progress of the Customs Declaration Service (CDS) programme, the FTA also questioned whether this was fit for purpose.

FTA has grave doubts that the new system, currently in development by HMRC (the revenue and Customs service), will be able to cope with the expected 255 million additional Customs declarations to be made at British ports each year when the UK leaves the EU.

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Ro-ro ports like Dover face severe congestion if Brexit means greater Customs checks for lorries

From bulk to sack

Kaneka North America needed an efficient, dust-free method of re-packaging PVC modifiers to replace manual methods in place since 2003.

The plant packages grades of modifier products into bulk bags (907kg, 771kg, 454kg) and 23kg sacks based on projected customer orders for product grades in specific bag sizes. When the actual orders don't match the projections, the plant needs to transfer products from one bulk bag size to another.

Previously, forklifts suspended a bulk bag above the hopper of a portable screw conveyor which transferred the material into the desired size bulk bag. Similarly, material was discharged from a bulk bag into the hopper of a valve bag filling machine for 23kg sacks.

Both operations presented safety risks from the suspended bulk bags and generated high levels of dust. Product loss also occurred, and operations frequently had to stop for cleaning and removing dust that would pose a safety hazard.

"Re-bagging was inefficient, and the fine powders generated dust," said Brian Wilson, staff reliability engineer.

In the new system supplied by Flexicon, a flexible screw conveyor transfers powder from the first of two Bulk-Out bulk bag dischargers to a Twin-Centerpost bulk bag filler. The second bulk bag discharger empties into the hopper of the valve bag filler for 23kg sacks located under the discharger.

Discharging to FIBCs

In Kaneka's 'bulk-to-bulk' transfer system, the loops of bulk bags are connected to a bag lifting frame which is forklifted onto a cradle at the top of the Bulk-Out discharger model BFF-C-X.

A Spout-Lock clamp ring that is raised pneumatically by a Tele-Tube telescoping tube makes a secure, sealed connection to the bag spout, preventing contamination of the plant environment with dust during material discharge. The telescoping tube maintains constant downward tension on the bag as it empties and elongates, promoting material flow into a 226 litre hopper.

As the bag lightens, Pop-Top extension arms at the top of the four discharger posts increasingly stretch the bag upward into a cone shape, as Flow-Flexer bag activators raise opposite bottom sides of the bag into a 'V' shape on timed cycles, promoting total discharge from the bag.

The receiving hopper of the discharger is equipped with a hinged lid and bag tray support, allowing material to be dumped manually from sacks, boxes and other containers.

A 3.6m long flexible screw conveyor, inclined at 45deg, transfers the PVC modifiers from the hopper to Twin-Centerpost bulk bag filler with height-adjustable fill head to accommodate a wide range of bag sizes.

The operator attaches the bag loops to retractable hooks that support the bag during filling. Under PLC control, plant air inflates the bag while an inflatable collar seals the bag spout which, together with a filtered air displacement vent, prevents the escape of dust.

Load cells supporting the filler transmit weight gain information to the PLC which stops the flexible screw conveyor once the target weight is gained.

Discharging to sacks

In Kaneka's 'bulk-to-sack' transfer system, the Bulk-Out model BFC-C-X bulk bag discharger empties contents of the bulk bag into the hopper of the valve bag filling machine for 23kg sacks.

The BFC Series discharger differs from the BFF Series discharger in that bags are lifted from the plant floor by means of a cantilevered I-beam with hoist and trolley, eliminating the need for a forklift. This hoist assembly was installed to fit limited headroom where the bulk bag discharger is located. As with the 'bulk-to-bulk' transfer system, the discharger employs a Spout-Lock clamp ring and Tele-Tube telescoping tube.

Dust-tight system

From start to finish, both operations are completely enclosed, greatly reducing dust emissions. Dust control for both transfer systems has been further improved by connecting to a recently installed dust collection system with explosion protection. Vent hoods and mass balance dust collection spouts were installed as required to make the system as clean and safe as possible.

"Dust generated from the re-bagging operation has been significantly reduced. The new system improves our productivity by an order of magnitude," Wilson concluded.

www.flexicon.co.uk



1) Operator in foreground initiates a bulk bag filling cycle while operator in background loads a bulk bag into the discharger frame using its electric hoist and trolley

2) The flexible screw conveyor transfers material from the bulk bag discharger (rear) to the bulk bag filler (foreground). A height-adjustable fill head accommodates bulk bags in any of three sizes used by the company

3) 'Bulk-to-sack' system: The bulk bag is loaded into the frame using the discharger's cantilevered I-beam, electric hoist and trolley, and then gravity discharged through the telescoping tube into a filling machine for 23 kg sacks





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