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By Tom Joyce

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Port of Antwerp prepared for worst

The Port of Antwerp can be part of the solution following the chaos of a No-Deal Brexit, with large volumes of cargo expected to shift to containers



A lack of certainty continues to hamper companies' efforts to ready themselves for Brexit, despite less than two months remaining before the UK automatically leaves the EU without a deal.

The Port of Antwerp, which has seen cargo trade with the UK increase from 11m tonnes to 17m tonnes over the past decade, is as prepared as it can be, according to international development manager Wim Dillen, but concerns linger on account of the confusion.

"Following the tumultuous return of Parliament after the summer break, some in the UK now suggest a No-Deal Brexit is less likely, but here in Europe, we are not counting on that," he said. "We hear that people in the UK are tired of the Brexit saga and I assure you, that is also the case here. However, we still don't know which way it will go, even with the short deadline ahead. We are not making assumptions and are as prepared as we can be for a No-Deal Brexit."

Following the referendum of 2016, Dillen

and his colleagues understood that the decision would have a major impact on the port, which has been getting ready ever since.

"We've always been a natural trading partner for the UK, which is second only to the US for us," said Dillen. "Within two weeks, we created a Brexit taskforce along with customs and food agencies and logistics service providers. We quickly came up with an action plan, including roadshows to find out what people needed and how we could respond. They were a big success. In London and Birmingham, our seminars attracted really good crowds. We will continue these in the coming months, as well as next year."

Regarding the chaos and delays that have been predicted at European ports in the event of a No-Deal Brexit, Dillen said that the port of Antwerp would likely be less impacted.

"We are different from other ports like Calais, Zeebrugge and Rotterdam because we are a container rather than a

ferry port," he said. "Most of the problems in the case of a No-Deal Brexit will occur where there is the most traffic, and that will be caused primarily by trucks with drivers. So we see this as an opportunity. Some ferry transport will shift to containers, and lots of companies are reorganising their cargo flows so that they can travel unaccompanied. In this we can be part of the solution."

Dillen also believes the port of Antwerp's size will be an advantage, not least for storage. "Antwerp is a very large port," he said. "We are the second largest in Europe, but we actually have the largest warehouse capacity. We also have highly reputed companies involved in coldstorage since we are a gateway into Europe for a lot of exotic produce like bananas and pineapples."

Dillen equally sees an opportunity for new short-sea connections with the UK after Brexit. "At the moment, the UK is focused on the big ports like Dover and Felixstowe, but there are ports in the UK that are underused that we could establish connections with in order to

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increase efficiency," he said. "We hope the UK government will look into this. The shipping lines are very open to the idea."

A crucial consequence of the UK leaving the EU without a deal is the complete lack of a transition period that could have provided time to agree a free trade agreement close to the existing situation.

"Small companies that rely heavily on trade with the UK will have sudden difficulties, as will UK companies in a comparable position," said Dillen. "Regardless of what happens, Europe and the UK will remain close partners. We will continue to trade, but it will be more costly and time-consuming, which is an issue when it comes to fresh food."

However, Dillen believes Antwerp's international experience will serve

the port well. "Close to 70 per cent of our trade is with third countries, including the US, Latin America, Africa, East Asia and Russia. So our logistics service providers know how to deal with third countries, including all the necessary customs formalities."

In the Spielberg movie Jurassic Park, Dillen said, "life finds a way". "Here, we believe business always finds a way," he explained. "The only thing that prevents it is a lack of transparency and certainty."

Parliament's attempts to force prime minister Boris Johnson to publish the government's assessment of the likely impact of a No-Deal Brexit have so far proved futile. Johnson has also pointedly refused to state whether or not he will abide by the new law passed this week forcing him to seek an extension of Article 50 from the EU until 31 January.

This week, Johnson continued to insist that negotiations for a deal with the EU were progressing well, despite suggestions to the contrary by the Irish prime minister and the fact that the UK's negotiating team has shrunk from more than 100 during Theresa May's time in charge to just four.

However, Dillen believes the blame for the present impasse lies not only with the UK. "The needs of business have been neglected by both sides of the Channel," he said. "At the Port of Antwerp, we are seeing how we can help companies on both sides. We want to support business, and I'm certain that all the other ports in Europe have the same aim."