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By Tom  
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## Antwerp ready for unexpected

With major tests on the horizon in the form of Covid-19 and Brexit, the Port of Antwerp is as prepared as it can be, says Ingrid Vanstreels



Ingrid Vanstreels, key account manager shippers & forwarders, Antwerp Port Authority

**H**ow has the Port of Antwerp fared during this unprecedented crisis? What sort of impact has the pandemic had on volumes?

**Ingrid Vanstreels:** We are proud to have succeeded in keeping the port operational throughout the Covid-19 crisis. The lockdown started in mid-March and the government was quick to confirm the Port of Antwerp as critical infrastructure for the country so we could receive the means and necessary guidelines to remain open.

We have seen a decrease in volumes due to blank sailings, but in perishables we recorded an increase of 23 per cent. Retail from China fell, but fresh products have boomed, as people think more about their health. Most European ports have confirmed negative growth figures, but we have managed to maintain 0.4 per cent growth in volumes compared with last year.

Potatoes, bananas and tropical fruits have all increased in volume. In the

second quarter, we saw perishables grow by 15 per cent compared with last year. We had predicted growth in a diverse range of food products, but we never expected this sort of increase. If this continues we will end the year with an average reefer increase of 15-20 per cent, which is big.

**What are your expectations going forward?**

**IV:** We don't know what to expect. The government is closely monitoring infections. Europe is seeing an increase, but we're prepared. Everyone knows what to do now. We are keeping to the sanitary guidelines and the Romware Covid Radius digital bracelet continues to help workers stay a safe distance apart.

Logistics is the key sector since people can't work from home – those involved in documentation, forwarding, et cetera. Since lockdown, trust in those working from home has increased significantly. This trust is important because we are unlikely to go back to the way things

were before. What we learned from lockdown is, if you can do it from home, do it from home.

**A No-Deal Brexit appears increasingly likely at the start of 2021. Is this sort of uncertainty another concern?**

**IV:** We've been working on Brexit for more than two years now, with a special team focused on the preparations. Our customs authority has more staff and phytosanitary inspectors, but at the moment, we have no idea what the impact will be on border checks or what the queues will be like. For perishables, phytosanitary checks will probably be necessary, although nothing is certain.

One of the main questions is, are the UK ports prepared? Do they have the required staff and facilities? We fear the victims will be UK consumers. Prices of fresh products are certain to increase in the supermarkets and the UK imports a lot of food from Europe.

<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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**Has the crisis impacted the port's ability to push ahead with a progressive agenda on the climate?**

**IV:** Our commitment to invest in sustainability has not been affected. The European Green Deal is very ambitious. We want to be the first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and we believe we can make this happen even earlier. We are great believers

in climate-neutral and it's part of our business strategy. We are constantly investing in new energy such as wind turbines, we reuse energy from the locks, we are looking to see how we can store hydrogen energy from sister ports for use in Antwerp,

and we try to move containers and reefers by rail and barge instead of by truck. These are long-term projects that we need to keep investing in.