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Midseason Tonnage Report: Lows and highs during a pandemic

DULUTH, Minn. — After an early summer surge, maritime tonnage through the Port of Duluth-Superior slowed atypically in August, amidst a tepid recovery from COVID-induced lows.

Total tonnage stood 31 percent behind the 2019 pace through Aug. 31, driven primarily by declines in coal and iron ore tonnage (down 59 percent and 26 percent, respectively). The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed those drops, shuttering industrial facilities and reducing demand for electricity and steel. Despite the reopening of many such facilities and an incremental return to more typical consumption, the United States' steel capability utilization rate remained at 65.1 percent during the week ending Sept. 12, compared to 80.3 percent during the same period in 2019. The Port of Duluth-Superior's diminished 2020 tonnage reflects this steel production disparity, as Minnesota provides approximately 80 percent of the iron ore used in America's first-pour steel.

On a more positive note, outbound grain and inbound wind energy cargoes emerged as the season's first-half highlights in the Port of Duluth-Superior. North American wheat shipments pushed grain tonnage 14.5 percent ahead of the 2019 pace through Aug. 31 and 7 percent above the five-season average. Wind turbine blades, towers and nacelles comprised the breakbulk boost, with Duluth Cargo Connect serving as a premier multimodal distribution hub to multiple sites in North America's heartland. Nine ships loaded with wind components visited the Clure Public Marine Terminal through Aug. 31, contributing to what could be a record campaign for the renewable energy cargo.

"If this pandemic-plagued shipping season was a prospector's pan, there'd be a lot of black sand and only a few golden nuggets," said Deb DeLuca, executive director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority. "But even a few golden nuggets are cause for excitement, and we're certainly pleased to see strong grain numbers and potentially record-setting success with wind cargoes."

As the maritime navigation season moves into its second half, the rapid pace of wind cargo shipments will continue, with overseas vessels arriving from Brazil, India, Spain and Turkey, among other countries. Duluth Cargo Connect manages all of these wind cargo arrivals, offloading with an assortment of heavy-lift machinery and collaborating with regional trucking companies to dispatch the components. Last year, Duluth Cargo Connect achieved a wind energy cargo single-season freight tonnage record, a figure likely to be eclipsed in 2020 with North America's furthest-inland seaport marking its 15th season as a wind cargo transport hub.

"A season like this emphasizes the importance of cargo diversity in a port," said DeLuca, who late last month began her third year at the Port Authority helm after serving previously as its government and environmental affairs director.

"No one expected a pandemic, but the port is weathering the storm, and we're extremely grateful for all of the hard-working men and women who keep essential cargoes moving through what has been an unprecedented shipping season thus far."

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Approximately 800 vessels and 35 million short tons of cargo move through the Port of Duluth-Superior each year, making it the Great Lakes' largest tonnage port and one of the nation's top 20. The Port supports 8,000 jobs and contributes \$1.4 billion in business revenue to the regional economy. Learn more at DuluthPort.com.