

AUDIT

Audit of the "rolling highway"

Federal Office of Transport, RAlpin AG

KEY FACTS

A central element of Swiss transport policy is to shift heavy goods transport from road to rail. It is enshrined in the Federal Constitution in the article on the protection of the Alps. In 2023, 37 million tonnes of transalpine freight were transported through Switzerland, with rail accounting for around 72%. Combined transport accounted for 20.4 million tonnes of this, which corresponds to 77% of total rail transport. The "rolling highway" accounted for 7% of total combined transport.

The rolling highway as accompanied combined transport enables a complete lorry to be loaded onto a low-floor wagon. The driver travels in an accompanying wagon. Unaccompanied combined transport (UCT), on the other hand, only transports containers or semi-trailers without articulated lorries on freight wagons for combined transport. The rolling highway service between Freiburg im Breisgau (D) and Novara (I) is operated by RAlpin AG.

In its dispatch of 30 September 2022, the Federal Council proposed the continued operation of the rolling highway until the end of 2026. Parliament decided to maintain operations until 2028. Parliament approved a payment framework totalling CHF 106 million for the continued operation of the rolling highway from 2024 to 2028. This amount also includes a financial contribution from the Confederation towards the costs of liquidating RAlpin AG for the year after the rolling highway ceases operations.

In 2017, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) evaluated the contribution made by RoLa to the shift and how this affects the cost recovery ratio.⁴ In this audit, the SFAO assessed whether the compensation for the rolling highway was being used economically and effectively to achieve a sustainable shift of freight transport from road to rail. RAlpin AG took operational measures to provide the services economically under difficult conditions. As a transitional solution in combined transport, rolling highway supports the shift to rail. The rolling stock has reached the end of its economic life, the efficiency of subsidies is significantly lower compared to UCT and the current terminal in Novara will be closed by 2028 at the latest, this means that continued operation beyond 2028 cannot be justified for financial and operational reasons.

RoLa – an effective transitional solution

RAlpin AG, a joint venture between BLS, SBB and Hupac, has a plausible operational plan for the rolling highway until the end of 2028. Under the current conditions, the services can be provided effectively until 2028 so that the planned volumes of lorries can be transported reliably until cessation. In order to remain financially viable and ultimately provide its services economically, RAlpin AG is optimising its production processes in a comprehensible manner from an operational and financial perspective.

However, the SFAO sees a need for action in the financial planning up to the planned cessation of operations in 2028. The financial planning must be continuously updated. RAlpin AG should work with the FOT to develop a forward-looking plan for the possible premature cessation of the rolling highway and subsequent liquidation of RAlpin AG. It should also do this in particular in the event that the framework conditions for operations deteriorate, e.g. due to longer interruptions to operations as a result of major engineering works, a sharp decline in traffic or if the rolling stock is no longer fit for use.

⁴ Evaluation of the rolling highway, SFAO 17570, available on the SFAO website.

UCT offeres new possibilities

The accompanying wagons and the low-floor wagons will reach their maximum service life in the next few years. The terminal at the current location in Novara is to be closed by 2028 at the latest. The number of shipments is stagnating, and the continuation of the rolling highway would only be feasible with major new investments in rolling stock and infrastructure. From an economic point of view, such an investment should be avoided. The definitive cessation of the rolling highway is therefore enshrined in law.

The efficiency of subsidies for UCT is significantly better than for the rolling highway: in 2024, the average compensation per shipment was CHF 61 for UCT and CHF 269 for the rolling highway. No more compensation is planned for all combined transport beyond 2030.

With the extension until 2028, rolling highway customers have enough time to switch to a UCT service. Even for non-craneable semi-trailers, there is a functioning service with several connections per day. The UCT offering with new terminals and services is growing and offers new opportunities.

A shift back to road transport cannot be ruled out

Combined transport faces challenges in terms of train reliability and punctuality. Although Switzerland has expanded its transalpine infrastructure, the access routes remain a problem. The biggest challenge for the coming years is the considerable maintenance and investment backlog in Germany. This backlog, together with rising train path and energy prices, will further exacerbate the situation. These factors could lead to traffic shifting to road, especially if the roads appear more attractive despite the German maintenance backlog and congestion on the entire north-south axis.

The FOT is aware of the problems in north-south traffic and is attempting to influence the development of rail solutions by participating in various international committees.