

Port of Virginia expansion boosts ultralarge container vessel capacity

Ship channel up to 1,400 feet wide in some areas, permitting 2-way traffic of largest vessels

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Port officials estimate the wider channel will reduce the amount of time ultralarge container vessels spend berthing and waiting to unload cargo by up to 15%. (Photo: Port of Virginia)

[The Port of Virginia](#) recently completed a project to widen its ship channel to allow better access for the world's largest container ships.

The port's shipping channel is now up to 1,400 feet wide in some areas, allowing simultaneous two-way traffic of ultralarge container vessels (ULCVs) traveling through Norfolk Harbor, officials said.

“Before the channel was widened, the Coast Guard would have to put restrictions on the channel for vessels to pass. When ULCVs are on their way in or out, it closed the channel to all other traffic,” Joe Harris, spokesman for the Port of Virginia, told FreightWaves. “Now we can pass two ULCVs at once or a container ship and a coal ship, or a coal ship and a Navy ship at the same time. It’s very efficient for all the partners in the harbor.”

Port officials estimate the wider channel will reduce the amount of time ULCVs spend berthing by up to 15%.

The channel widening is part of the port’s \$1.4 billion strategic infrastructure investment package that aims to support larger cargo ships and increase the speed of freight moving through the gateway.

Work is also underway to dredge the port’s shipping channels to 55 feet deep and the ocean approach to 59 feet deep. The deepening project is scheduled to be completed in 2025.

The wider and deeper channel will lay the groundwork for future developments at the Port of Virginia, Harris said.

“The wider channel will allow us to turn our berths quicker and more regularly, so we don’t have to have that vessel sitting berthed for four hours while others are passing, and then it can pull out, so you have that greater flow of cargo and more efficient flow of cargo,” Harris said. “When you have that flow, what it does is it truly attracts users that want to be around a logistics center and brings them to Virginia.”

Headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia, the port consists of four deep-water marine terminals, an upriver terminal and an inland intermodal terminal.

The Port of Virginia, operated by the Virginia Port Authority, is one of the busiest seaports in the country. In 2023, the port handled 3.3 million twenty-foot equivalent units, compared to 3.7 million units in 2022, which was a record for the port.

Class I railroads Norfolk Southern and CSX serve the port via on-dock intermodal container transfer facilities at the Virginia International Gateway and Norfolk International Terminals.

The Port of Virginia is also a hub for 30 international shipping lines that offer direct, dedicated service to more than 80 ports around the world. In an average week, more than 40 international container, breakbulk and roll-on/roll-off vessels are serviced at the port's marine terminals.

In addition to being the headquarters of the Port of Virginia, Norfolk is home to Naval Station Norfolk, home port of the U.S. Navy's Fleet Forces Command. It is one of the biggest naval stations in the world.

"This is a big military town; the world's largest Navy base is truly our next door neighbor," Harris said. "We have a continual flow of men and women coming out of the military with logistics experience. That's a really good pipeline to continue to feed, not just the jobs inside the port, but outside the port as well. That's a big sell for companies looking to do business here, because they ask that very question, they often have this checklist, can we build and maintain our workforce there? That answer is always, 'Yes, you can.'"

Harris said one of the major goals with the expansion of the shipping channel is to draw more regularly scheduled service from global carriers to call at the port using ultralarge container vessels.

"What we hope to do with this wider channel and soon-to-be-deeper channel is to attract more first-in and last-out vessel calls," Harris said. "When a vessel comes to the East Coast, it may go to three or four ports.

The goal is to have it come to Virginia first, because as a cargo owner, you get your cargo that much quicker, or leave Virginia last, because as an exporter, your cargo is moving to market quicker.”

In February, the port expanded its international portfolio with two new services that connect directly with the [Latin American market](#).

One service is a joint effort by ocean carriers CMA CGM and Ocean Network Express linking the Port of Virginia to ports in Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador and Panama. In this service, the Port of Virginia is the last stop for the U.S. East Coast.

The other service is being offered by ocean carrier Mediterranean Shipping Co., which has added South and Central American port calls of its Ecuador NWC service to its Scan Baltic service. The expanded service, named the Ecuador — NWC & Scan Baltic — USA, calls ports in the Bahamas, Panama, Costa Rica, Peru and Ecuador.