

Georgia Ports makes progress on inland rail hub

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Rendering of Blue Ridge Connector intermodal terminal under construction in Gainesville, Ga. (Credit: Georgia Ports Authority)

Construction continues on the Georgia Ports Authority's Blue Ridge Connector (BRC), which will expand intermodal rail service between the state's northeast logistics corridor and the Port of Savannah.

Wesley Barrell, GPA's general manager of inland operations, told the inaugural Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce Logistics Forum, "Construction is moving along well. With another six weeks of earthwork, the rail yard grade will be met, allowing for additional engineering to advance. We are working closely with Norfolk Southern on tying our infrastructure into their existing track."

When completed in 2026, the \$127 million, 104-acre site near Gainesville will host six tracks totaling 18,000 feet of capacity for intermodal trains, with annual capacity of 200,000 containers. Norfolk Southern will provide five-day-a-week service to the BRC, which will operate from 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday. The Authority will provide expedited service from Savannah to the BRC with third-day availability of containers from ship to door.

The inland port will link northeast Georgia's manufacturing and logistics corridor with Savannah's 36 global container ship services that currently call each week.

Speaking at the Aug. 6 event at Lanier Technical College in Gainesville, Barrell said poultry producers have expressed interest in the service.

"We will offer refrigerated cargo by rail, with this unique transit from the Blue Ridge Connector to Savannah. There are five cold storage freezers within 5 miles of our location, and more than 50 users of those cold storage facilities."

Slated to open in 2026, the facility will serve an existing customer base that also includes manufacturers of heavy equipment and forest products.

The Authority said a locally owned company recently began operation of a Foreign Trade Zone in the area, where import cargo may be held for storage, assembly or manufacturing without payment of duties until the goods move into the domestic market. Located within 10 miles of the BRC, the FTZ was established to serve international cargo moving through the rail hub and will give cargo owners greater flexibility in the timing of their supply chains.

The new intermodal service to Savannah will also offer a reduced carbon footprint through lower emissions per container, as well as a ready supply of empty containers for exports without the need for truck trips.

The inland rail connections are supported by what the GPA says is the largest on-port intermodal facility in North America, the Port of Savannah's Mason Mega Rail Terminal.

Mason can accommodate six 10,000-foot trains simultaneously, doubling Georgia Ports' previous annual intermodal capacity to 2 million TEUs a year. It is integral to GPA's "1,2,3" cargo strategy — one day off the vessel, two-day transportation and third-day availability.

"With 24 miles of on-terminal track, Mason Mega Rail provides ample space to take on new rail business," Barrell said, adding that it links Savannah by rail to an array of inland markets from Atlanta and Dallas to Memphis, Tennessee, as well as Chicago and other Midwest destinations.

The GPA said it can move cargo from vessel offload to departing rail in Savannah in just 29 hours, the fastest of any major U.S. port.

The Blue Ridge Connector is the GPA's second Georgia inland port, after the Appalachian Regional Port (APR) near Chatsworth in northwest Georgia. The inland hub in fiscal 2024, which ended June 30, handled a record 36,730 rail lifts, up 9% from FY2023, itself a record.

Barrell said the APR has attracted nearby major shippers including GE Appliances, LG and solar technology producer Hanwha Qcells, now on its third expansion.

Other goods handled there include carpet and flooring, automotive manufacturing components, and tires. Nearby Interstate 75 and U.S. Highway 411 offer access to markets in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky.

The Authority further extended its reach recently, adding the CSX inland Carolina Connector rail service linking Savannah to Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Barrell said the speed of the connection means importers can get access to cargo before it could even be offloaded at another East Coast port. For exports out of Raleigh-Durham, trucks can reach the CSX terminal in 30 minutes, instead of three hours to the nearest mid-Atlantic port.