Benjamin Franklin once described insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” The intermodal transportation system, whose problems are by now well documented, continues to invest in more studies. At this point, we are suffering from near “paralysis by analysis.”

Despite the urgent need for a comprehensive national freight policy, the federal government seems unable or unwilling to move transportation concerns up to the priority of national defense, homeland security or economic growth issues. Resolution of transportation challenges is further complicated by the diversity in ownership and operation of transportation infrastructure. Since a one-size-fits-all solution is impossible, the private and public sectors must develop a working web of intermodal transportation solutions.

The following is offered as a “Top Ten” list for consideration.

1. Determine intermodal freight movement to be a national priority. This requires all branches of government, because the Department of Transportation alone cannot accomplish these objectives. The missions of the Defense, Energy, Homeland Security and Commerce departments all rely on the freight transportation network.

2. Protect system reliability by preserving the considerable transportation infrastructure already in place — especially if untapped (in other words, excess) capacity exists. The nation has been living off a once-in-forever legacy of regulated, excess capacity that has been exhausted in the 25 years since trucking and rail deregulation.

3. Enable timely, consistent and accurate measurement of transportation capacity and productivity. Since there are no metrics commonly available to objectively measure freight capacity and productivity, we don’t really know how much additional volume can be handled before the system effectively collapses.

4. Encourage private sector investment through tax incentives. Federal funding can no longer cover the costs of the capital improvements necessary to keep the system ready to manage demands of transportation.

5. Recognize and support regional freight solutions that are focused and that will deliver immediate benefits. Remember that what works in one region may not be successful in another. Also, all aspects of the freight system are not equally distributed. There is significant concentration of infrastructure and volume in a limited number of locations, which are often in densely populated regions that already are congested.

6. Level the flow of freight across the existing system. One way to help relieve congestion immediately is to move more cargo during off-peak hours, and better use available capacity. All links of the supply chain must be willing to explore alternatives.

7. Improve the appeal of intermodal trucking. Intermodal cannot continue its growth without a solution of the “last mile” necessary for pickup and delivery. Drayage cannot tolerate the vicious cycle of market exit (by many truckers) and degrading conditions for the remaining participants.

8. Improve the management of chassis. The U.S. is the only country in the world where chassis are not owned primarily by trucking companies; in the U.S., they are primarily owned by ocean carriers and, to some degree, railroads. The excessive inventory absorbs vast amounts of valuable terminal real estate and consumes scarce trucking resources in repositioning.

9. Improve management of the free time that is allowed before demurrage and detention charges are assessed at terminals. Carriers and terminal operators should limit the free time they permit strictly to the reasonable duration of regulatory processing and pickup. Demurrage and storage charges should be increased to a level that will deter cargo interests from staying beyond the free days. This will avoid the use of scarce resources as warehouse space.

10. Recruit, train and retain sufficient personnel to operate the system. Freight transportation cannot thrive without workers. The truck driver shortage is severe, and spot problems in the rail and marine sectors have caused national gridlock in recent years.

The private sector must continue to invest in its part of the transportation infrastructure, and the public sector must encourage private investment, while continuing to make the necessary government investment in public infrastructure. Both parties must take a long-term view, which anticipates national and regional capacity needs, fosters planning and provides appropriate incentives for investments by public and private stakeholders.

It is time for the industry to move from investigation to action. The public sector must invite the private sector to the table as full partners, and must make room for some new — perhaps even unconventional — policy solutions.

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