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Transaction costs in the transportation sector and infrastructure in North America: exploring harmonization of standards

Juan Carlos Villa



International Trade and Industry Unit

México, D. F., August 2007

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United Nations Publication

ISSN printed version: 1680-8800

ISSN online version 1684-0364

ISBN: 978-92-1-121652-3

LC/L.2762-P

LC/MEX/L.794

Sales N°: E.07.II.G.122

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Printed in United Nations, México, D. F.

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Abstract

Since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, trade between the three North American countries has almost tripled. However, there are substantial impediments for the efficient freight movement between the three countries. Major obstacles derive from transaction costs which reduce and sometimes eliminate the benefits gained from the removal of tariffs resulting from NAFTA. The paper analyzes North American truck, rail and maritime trade and transportation characteristics and operations that serve as the foundation to identify and quantify transaction costs caused by the lack of harmonized transportation regulations and infrastructure disparities. The research describes opportunities to reduce or eliminate costs along with a strategy to implement actions to reduce transaction costs in the transportation sector. An implementation plan for these actions is recommended with some examples of good practices that have taken place in Mexico.

Introduction

Since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, trade between the three North American countries has almost tripled. However, even though trade volumes have increased dramatically, there are substantial impediments for the efficient freight movement between the three countries. Major obstacles derive from transaction costs which reduce and sometimes eliminate the benefits gained from the removal of tariffs resulting from NAFTA. Transaction costs in this document are defined as those not associated with direct transportation costs such as freight rates, but those that arise from complying with security, safety and customs procedures, delays at border crossings and those associated with additional handling of freight due to lack of a harmonized transportation system in North America. These transaction costs increase prices for traded goods and affect the demand for goods produced in the three countries.

Even though transaction costs caused by regulatory divergences and inadequate transportation infrastructure are evident, very little has been done to quantify and address them. Some case-specific analyses exist for particular border crossings, but no studies have been found that address these issues at the North American level. This is precisely the issue which will be developed in this document. The objectives of the study are to analyze current trade characteristics and transportation practices in North America to identify issues that lead to transaction costs; perform a preliminary quantification of these transaction costs, and suggest a plan to reduce costs and increase Mexican competitiveness.

Trade in North America is dominated by land modes of transport (truck and rail), and by ocean. These three modes of transport account for more than 85 percent of the total trade in the region, and experience the largest share of regulatory issues and infrastructure disparities. International trade by air is only 4 percent of the value of NAFTA freight and less than 1 percent of the weight. There are no regulatory issues in the air freight sector that impede the development of this mode of transport in North America. Hence the analysis in this study will focus on land and sea transport.

The first section of this paper analyzes North American truck, rail and maritime trade and transportation characteristics and operations. This serves as the foundation to identify and quantify transaction costs caused by the lack of harmonized transportation regulations and infrastructure disparities in North America, which is presented in the second part of the paper. The third section describes opportunities to reduce or eliminate costs along with a strategy to implement actions to reduce transaction costs in the transportation sector. An implementation plan for these actions is recommended with some examples of good practices that have taken place in Mexico are included in the last section of the paper.

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