Port Launches Virtual Container Yard

The Port of Long Beach has launched a virtual container yard (VCY) that holds promise not only to improve the cost-efficiency of landside port-related freight logistics but also to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

The web-based information program now enables truckers to exchange empty containers for reuse outside the port, rather than draying them back or picking up empties at the port.

As the number of web-assisted interchanges (street turns) increases, the volume of empty containers moving back and forth at the port will decrease, relieving congestion on local freeways and in container terminals. Reducing unnecessary truck trips also will lower emissions from trucks, a key element of the ports’ Clean Air Action Plan.

The VCY, one of the first to be introduced in the United States, has been developed by the Port of Long Beach, with support from the Port of Los Angeles and the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority (ACTA), as part of a multi-faceted truck traffic reduction program.

Two firms that have excellent familiarity with ocean carriers and trucking companies have worked together to introduce the virtual container yard technology into the Southern California marketplace. Oakland-based International Asset Systems (IAS) is conducting outreach to ocean carriers. Outreach to the trucking community is being handled by Irvine-based eModal. The VCY process is initiated at www.emodal.com, Southern California’s port community system.

It has been estimated that 30-40 percent of intermodal trucks are hauling empty containers at any given moment, the result of an inefficient system in which containers are routinely returned to marine terminals or container depots after being unloaded. The VCY eliminates needless empty trips by matching available import containers “on the street” with export needs for equipment.

Until now, very few street turn opportunities for empties have been realized because arranging for them has been a cumbersome process. Now that an automated system is in place, trucking companies, ocean carriers, freeway commuters and the surrounding communities all stand to benefit.

Savings are recognized with the elimination of gate fees, storage charges and terminal handling fees. Container fleets can be more productive by better utilizing these assets. As fuel costs continue to rise, more efficient daily turns and savings can be anticipated.

Here are the basics of virtual container yard logistics. A carrier posts the availability of an empty container online, including its location. A trucker, seeking an empty container, uses an online search mechanism to locate available equipment by location. A match is identified, and the trucker requests a VCY transaction. An electronic authorization is issued, allowing the trucker to pick up the empty container and deliver it directly to the new customer.

The VCY integrates with ocean carriers’ equipment management systems. As the carrier’s system updates the status of each container, the information is transferred to the VCY and made available to approved trucking companies. A trucking company is allowed access to this information only if authorized by the ocean carrier.

To register, truckers can log on to eModal.com and select “Register” from the VCY dropdown menu.