

JTS Johanson Transportation Service

Freight Industry Guidebook

Topical insights from JTS Thought Leaders

Which Mode to Go? Differences Between OTR & Intermodal Freight.

By Jeff Perry, Branch Manager - Rail Intermodal Division

In the U.S. there are two main options to consider for domestic freight moves – over-the-road trucking and intermodal. Which is the best option for your freight needs? Let's consider the economics, efficiency, and benefits (and downsides) of each.

Intermodal

Intermodal weaves together two or more transportation methods – in most cases using the power of rail freight transportation and the finesse of trucking in tandem. It requires an empty container to be loaded at the shipper's site, then moved by truck to a rail yard where it is placed on a train. Your goods move from one rail ramp to another, and when they arrive the container is again taken off by a crane and loaded on to a drayage truck. It then drives to its final destination – typically a warehouse or company shipping dock within a short distance.

The upsides of intermodal transportation are many. Not only does it offer a greener, more fuel-efficient solution with reduced carbon emissions, but it also boasts an overall more cost-effective package, especially when you have a schedule that allows for lengthier transit times. Intermodal opens up the possibility for coast-to-coast shipping, especially for trips of 500 miles or more – all at a lower cost.

Over-the-road trucking

OTR shines in how it takes your freight directly, and quickly, from point a to b, with minimal to no handling in between. Drivers use GPS and AI to find the fastest, most efficient route possible to make transit time shorter. This is advantageous when traveling to a location that is not near a rail ramp. Your freight is also highly secure as the presence of the driver alongside the freight helps ensure its safekeeping throughout the journey.

Truckload service offers a variety of equipment to suit your cargo needs. Temperature-controlled trailers are for freight requiring a specific, sustained temperature. For non-perishable goods, dry vans and flatbeds are a less expensive option.

Trucking has more flexibility when it comes to overweight or oversized cargo. The weight maximum for trucking is 2,500 pounds more than rail.

Summary

Intermodal is a better option when:

- Your shipping destination is further than 500 miles.
- Pick-up/delivery locations are within 100 miles of a rail yard.
- Your cargo is less fragile.
- Trucking capacity is tight.
- Your business prioritizes maintaining a cleaner environment.
- Your business goals prioritize cost savings.
- Your delivery schedule is flexible.
- Goods have a lower value.

Over-the-road trucking is a better option when:

- Your shipping destination is 500 miles or less.
- Pick-up/delivery locations are more than 100 miles from a rail yard.
- Your cargo is oversized or odd-shaped.
- Flexibility and speed are of the utmost priority.
- Goods have a higher value.

Some situations are not so straightforward. Our logistics experts will help you customize a solution that most closely fits your business needs.

For a more detailed look at the differences, see the chart on the second page.

For more information, contact our Rail Intermodal Team at (800) 742-2053.

© 2026 Johanson Transportation Service. All rights reserved.

MC#159429 OTI#051756NF DOT#2212002



JTS Johanson Transportation Service

Freight Industry Guidebook

Topical insights from JTS Thought Leaders

	OTR	INTERMODAL
General Cost:	$$$	$$
Pricing based on:	Linehaul, miles, higher cost fuel, demand.	Linehaul, lowest cost fuel, demand.
Distance:	Distance <500 miles.	Distance >500 miles.
Transit Time:	Faster, ideal for time-sensitive freight.	8-10 days coast-to-coast. 5-7 days West Coast to Midwest.
Flexibility:	Very flexible schedule.	Less flexible. Limited to rail schedules.
Destination:	Practically unlimited. Dock-to-dock.	Must go rail ramp to drayman to dock.
Route Limits:	Limited to roads. (Bridge Laws in CA).	Limited to rail tracks. (Bridge Laws in CA).
Equipment available:	53' dry van, step decks, curtain-side trailers. 53' temp-controlled trailers.	53' dry stacktrain containers. 53' high cube containers. 40' and 45' ISO boxes.
Cargo wt. max:	46,000 lbs. (dry). 42,500 - 44,000 lbs. (reefer). 48,000 lbs. (flatbed).	More cost-effective for heavy items.
Axle limits:	Weight distribution over axles is a factor.	Axle limitations.
Cargo, inside dimensions, standard:	53' L x 102" W x 108" H / 3,820 cu. ft. (Dry van). 53' L x 97.5" W x 103-1/2" H/ 3,600 cu. ft. (Reefer).	52'6" L x 98" W x 106.5" H (53' High cube containers) / 3,830 cu. ft.
Cargo, inside dimensions, oversized:	>8.5' W x 13.5' H x 53' L or 80,000 lbs.	Flatcars available for oversized & overweight items.
Typical standard cargo:	CPG, durable goods, apparel, food & beverage, nursery.	Ag, manufacturing, food & beverage, forest products, petroleum-based products, chemicals, raw material.
Typical oversized cargo:	Construction equipment, farm machinery, boats, aircraft, large vehicles.	Construction equipment, farm machinery, boats, aircraft, large vehicles.
Temp-controlled:	Available in **all** lanes.	Available in **some** lanes.
Dry:	Available in all lanes.	Available in all lanes.
Value:	High value goods.	Lower value goods.
Fragility:	Good for fragile freight.	Less ideal, but rail has smoother rides than ever.
Hazmat:	Limited coverage.	More coverage.
Security required:	More secure. Driver is with freight always. Seals available.	Less secure. Addditional handling required. Seals available.
Environmentally-friendly:	Less fuel-efficient. 7 mpg. Higher emissions.	4x more efficient. 475 ton-miles/gal. Less carbon emission.
Paperwork/forms:	BOL, Signed Delivery Receipt.	BOL, Signed Delivery Receipt.
Tracking needed:	Real-time tracking.	Real-time tracking.
Other benefits & challenges:	Faster, more direct path. More susceptible to weather and traffic delays.	Less highway traffic; better for the environment. Less susceptible to weather and traffic delays.

© 2026 Johanson Transportation Service. All rights reserved.

MC#159429 OTI#051756NF DOT#2212002