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Sun Sentinel: "Florida ports dig deep to draw bigger ships, create jobs"

"Florida ports dig deep to draw bigger ships, create jobs"

Sun Sentinel

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With varying success, South Florida's seaports are striving to grow wider and deeper to lure a bigger share of the increased trade expected to flow from Asia and Latin America.

Port Everglades just got approval — 18 years in the making — for a federally funded dredging project. PortMiami already has dug its harbor down to 50 feet to attract a new generation of super-sized ships.

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All of Florida's ports hope to benefit from increased trade, as a growing middle class in emerging nations demands more American goods.

"The increase in freight is such that there's plenty of growth for everyone," predicted Jim Walker, director of navigation policy for the American Association of Port Authorities. **"The Florida ports are in a good location. Certainly with the Panama Canal widening, they are well-positioned for growth."**

Labor strikes at ports along the West Coast this year already have prompted some shippers to shift routes to the East Coast through the Panama Canal.

"At any given time, 30 vessels anchored offshore were waiting to be offloaded. People lost cargo — perishables just rotted on the docks," said Doug Wheeler, president of the Florida Ports Council, which promotes the state's 15 seaports. "A lot of shippers decided that diversification would be a good safeguard against this kind of thing in the future."

Port leaders, who accompanied Gov. Rick Scott on a promotional trip to California in April, are trying to bring some of that business to Florida. And the ports are expanding to handle it.

Port Everglades expects to double its cargo by 2020, mostly from north-south routes to Latin America. More trade from the Pacific through the Panama Canal would be a bonus, Cernak said.

Using rail links established at the port last year, these goods can be distributed by freight train to markets serving 60 percent of the U.S. population within three days.

More efficient trade — more boxes on bigger vessels — saves shipping costs and may bring a wider variety of goods to Florida and the hinterland at lower prices.

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