

Railway carloadings, May 2021

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in *The Daily*, Wednesday, July 28, 2021

Highlights

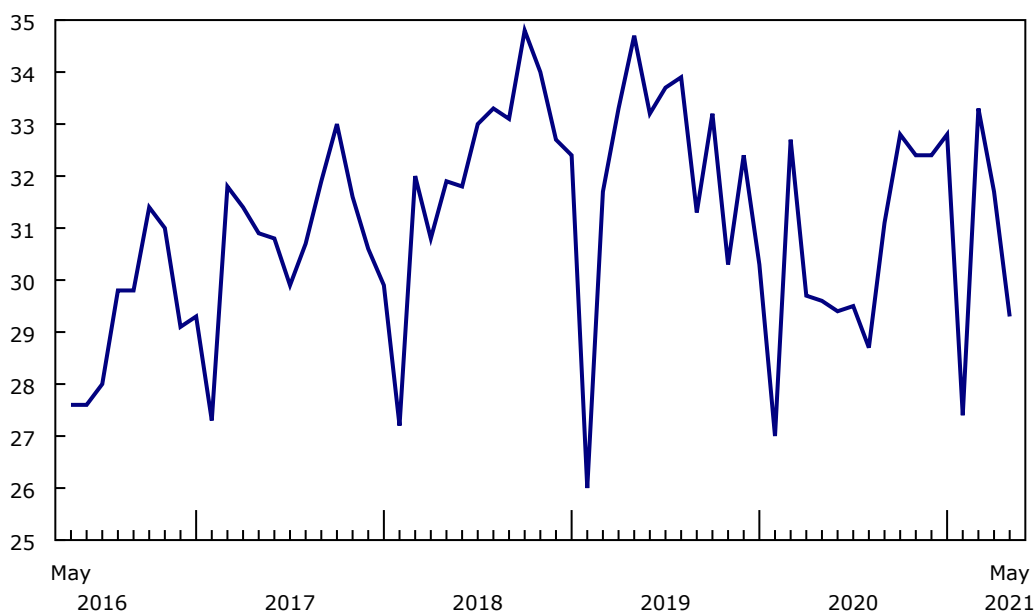
In May, Canadian railways transported 29.3 million tonnes of freight, down slightly (-0.9%) from May of 2020. This marked the first decline since October 2020—following six straight months of year-over-year increases.

While the overall volume was down year over year, it remained close to the five-year average of 30.9 million tonnes for May.

To further explore current and historical data in an interactive format, please visit the [Monthly Railway Carloadings: Interactive Dashboard](#).

Chart 1 Railway carloadings, total tonnage

millions of tonnes



Source(s): Table 23-10-0216-01.

Cumulative tonnage remains strong

During the first five months of 2021, the volume of goods moved by rail totalled 154.5 million tonnes, up 3.5% compared with the same period in 2020, and second only to a record high of 158.2 million tonnes recorded for these same months in 2019.

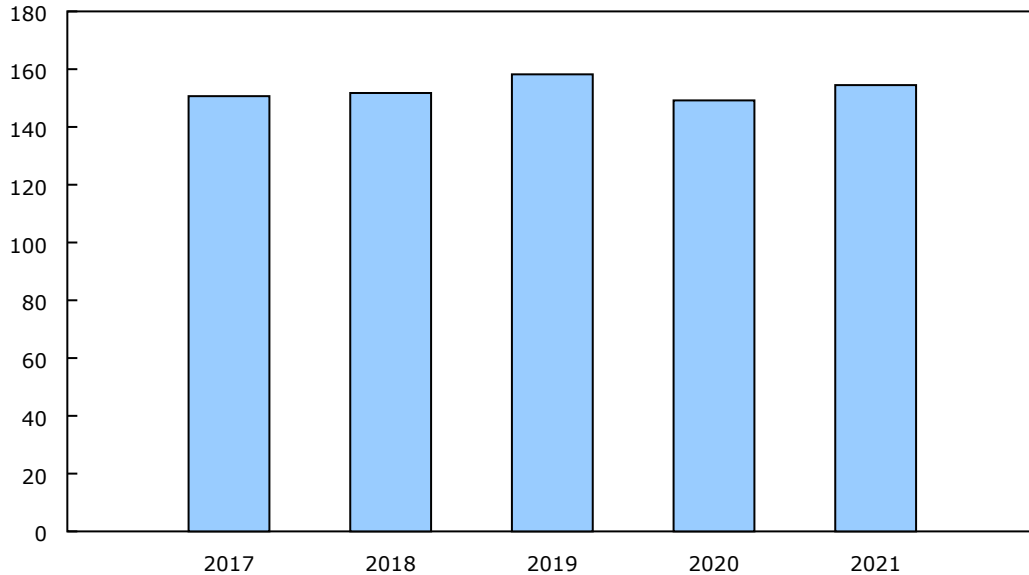


Statistics Canada
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Chart 2
Railway carloading components, total tonnage, January to May, 2017 to 2021

millions of tonnes



Source(s): Table 23-10-0216-01.

Iron ores and concentrates drop

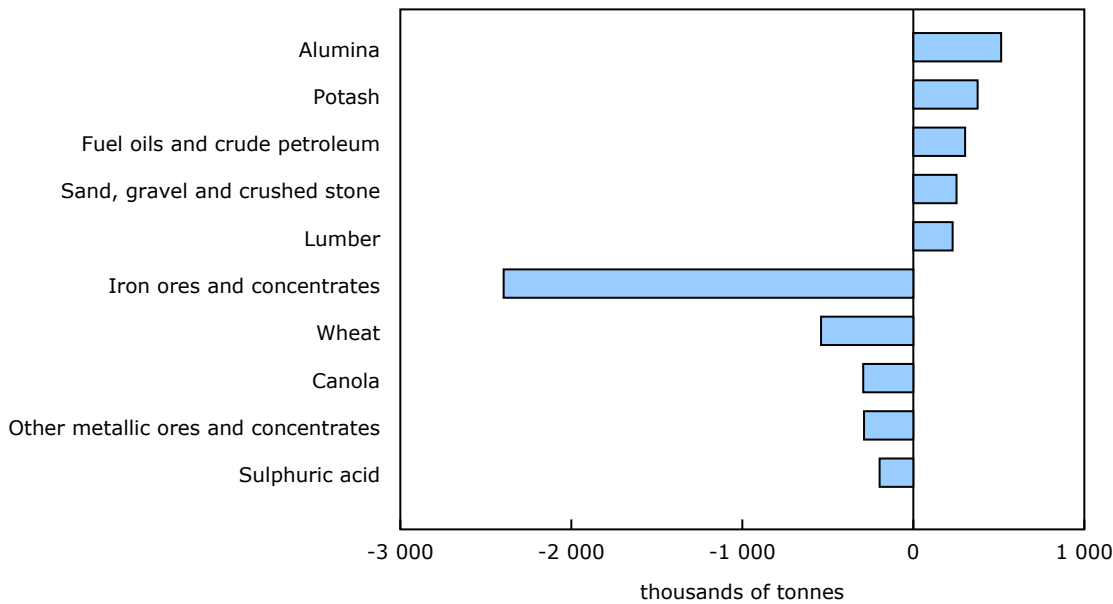
The non-intermodal rail operations in Canada accounted for the decline in the overall volume of freight carried, falling 6.1% year over year to 22.9 million tonnes.

Shipments of iron ores and concentrates experienced a sharp drop of 45.2% (-2.4 million tonnes) in May, following six consecutive months of substantial year-over-year growth. This drop coincided with a temporary shutdown of iron ores and concentrates production at a Quebec–Labrador mine site in May, due to a labour disruption.

Loadings of certain agricultural and food products also declined in May. Wheat loadings, which have increased year over year each month since May 2020, dipped 19.8% (-540 000 tonnes) from the same month in 2020. Similarly, loadings of canola dropped 32.7% (-293 000 tonnes) compared with the same month in 2020—the third consecutive month of decline.

In addition, other metallic ores and concentrates loadings sharply declined by 288 000 tonnes in May 2021 after two straight months of year-over-year growth in April (+8.4%) and March (+15.1%). Loadings of sulfuric acid were also down 49.2% (-197 000 tonnes) in May from the same month a year ago.

Chart 3
Railway carloadings, largest commodity differences, May 2020 to May 2021



Source(s): Table 23-10-0216-02.

Alumina trending up

Partly offsetting these declines were increases for other commodities. Alumina led the pack, with loadings increasing by 514 000 tonnes—more than 400 times the volume in May 2020, the highest increase in tonnage ever recorded.

It appears that infrastructure investment to stimulate economic recovery has triggered a rebound in demand for metals. This may be driving the demand for alumina—feedstock for the production of aluminum metals. As reported earlier in the [Monthly Survey of Manufacturing](#), sales in the primary metal industry grew 3.6% to a record level of \$4.9 billion in May, driven by higher sales of alumina and aluminum production and processing.

Loadings of potash posted a year-over-year increase after three consecutive months of decline—rising 18.8% (+376 000 tonnes) from May 2020.

In addition, loadings of fuel oils and crude petroleum rose for the first time after substantial year-over-year declines for over a year, up by 43.8% (+303 000 tonnes) from the same month a year earlier. Demand for fuel is up, which may signal an economic recovery and an easing of travel restrictions.

Other significant increases were reported for sand, gravel and crushed stone, with loadings surging by 171.4% (+253 000 tonnes) in May 2021 from the same period in 2020, following a strong gain in April (+65.8%).

Finally, loadings of lumber, which have risen for nine months in a row, were 33.8% (+230 000 tonnes) above May 2020 levels, reflecting a strong demand from the renovation and housing market.

Intermodal loadings continue to surge

Intermodal loadings—mainly containers—surged by 34.5% to 3.3 million tonnes in May from the same month in 2020. This is the second-highest volume for this month on record, and comes on the heels of substantial year-over-year increases in April (+27.8%) and March (+38.5%).

Higher imports of consumer goods for inventory replenishment and online shopping continued to create strong demand for intermodal transport. As reported in the [Canadian international merchandise trade](#), Canada's imports of consumer goods experienced a substantial increase of 19.4% year over year in May.

American freight remains strong

Also helping to offset the decline in commodity traffic this May, freight traffic from the United States remained well above the volume recorded in 2020 for a third consecutive month, rising 14.4% to 3.1 million tonnes.

Note to readers

Data are subject to revisions. The monthly railway carloadings data are revised, on a monthly basis, for the month immediately prior to the current reference month being published to reflect new information provided by respondents. The data in this release are not seasonally adjusted.

The Monthly Railway Carloadings Survey collects data on the number of rail cars, tonnage, units and 20-foot equivalent units from railway transporters operating in Canada that provide for-hire freight services.

The [Transportation Data and Information Hub](#), a web portal developed jointly by Statistics Canada and Transport Canada, provides Canadians with online access to comprehensive statistics and measures on the country's transportation sector.

Available tables: [table 23-10-0216-01](#).

Definitions, data sources and methods: [survey number 2732](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).