Railway carloadings, March 2022

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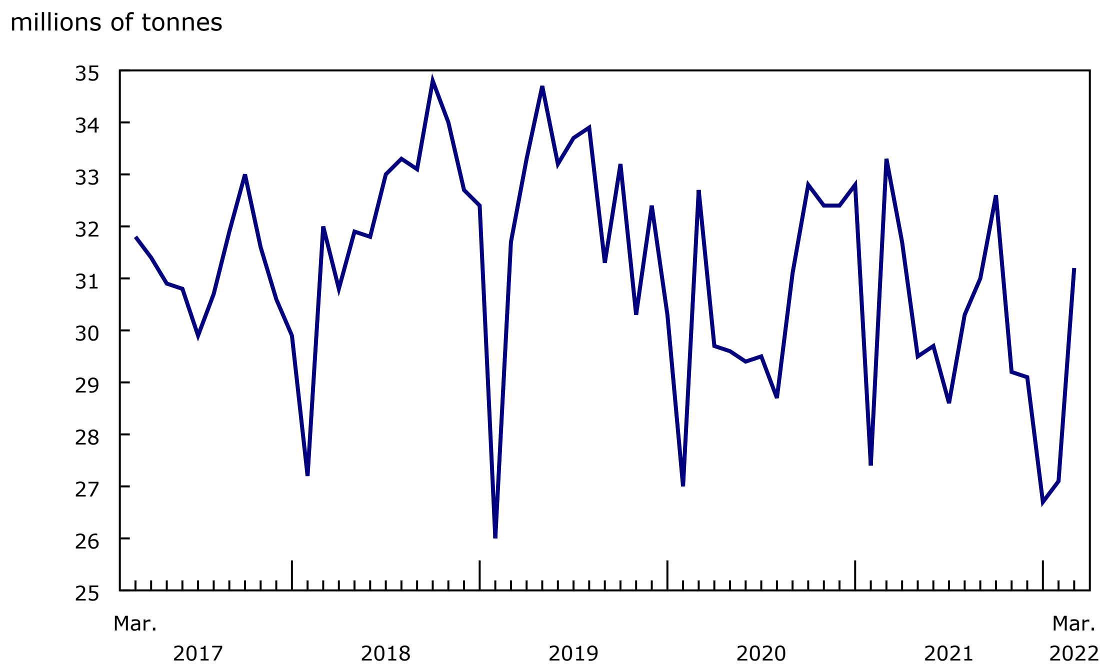
Highlights

Canadian railways transported 31.2 million tonnes of freight in March, down 6.2% compared with March 2021, marking the seventh straight month of year-over-year decline.

The overall tonnage was the lowest for March since 2016, but remained just below the five-year average of 32.3 million tonnes for this month. While grain shipments were down substantially, carloadings of some energy products registered strong gains, tempering the overall decline.

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



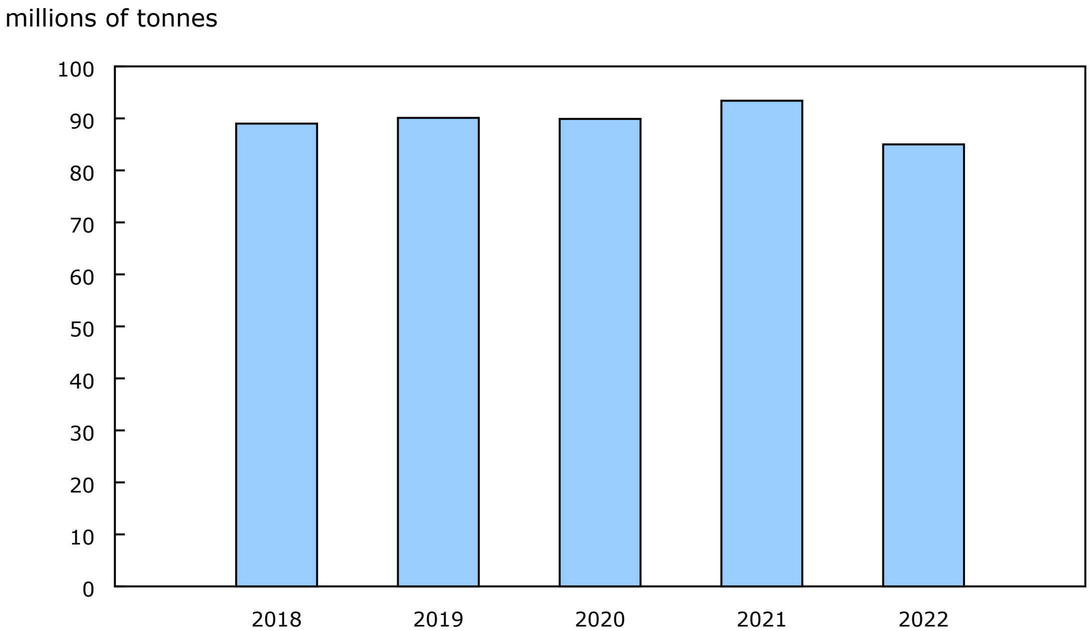
Source(s): Table 23-10-0216-01.

First quarter volume hits six-year low

For the first quarter of 2022, the cumulative volume of goods moved by rail totalled 85.1 million tonnes. This was a decline of 9.0% from the first quarter of 2021, and the lowest cumulative first quarter total since 2016.

March's decline in total rail freight was attributable to lower volumes of domestic loadings, both non-intermodal (mainly commodities) and intermodal (mainly containers). There was also a short labour disruption at one rail carrier during March.

Chart 2
Railway carloadings, total tonnage, January to March, 2018 to 2022



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

Grain loadings continue to slide

Non-intermodal freight loadings in Canada have declined year over year for seven straight months, dropping by 9.4% to 23.8 million tonnes in March. The largest decreases were reported in agricultural and food products, notably grain, reflecting the depletion of stocks throughout 2020, along with lower crop production because of the drought across the Prairies in summer 2021.

Wheat loadings continued their slide that began in May 2021, falling by 57.3% (-1 638 000 tonnes) in March compared with the same month in 2021, marking the 11th consecutive month of year-over-year declines in tonnage.

Similarly, loadings of canola, which have fallen year over year each month since spring 2021, plummeted further by 61.1% (-574 000 tonnes) in March. This drop followed large year-over-year declines in February (-57.3%) and January (-54.4%).

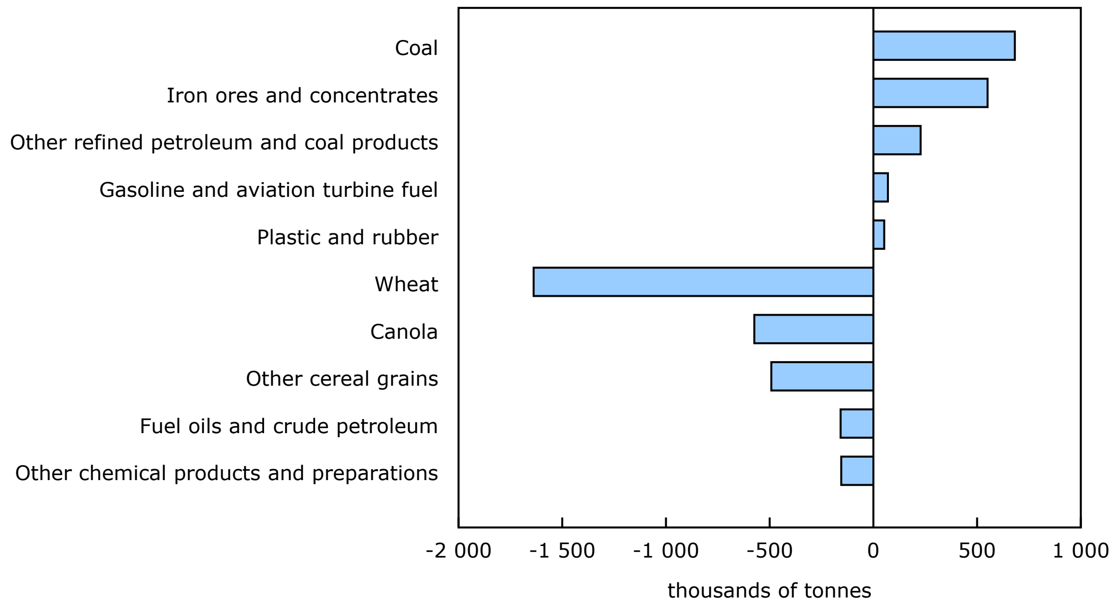
In addition, loadings of other cereal grains fell year over year for the sixth consecutive month, down 58.5% (-492 000 tonnes), the second largest drop in tonnage over the six-month period.

These findings mirror the declines in Canadian exports of farm and intermediate food products in March, as reported in Canadian international merchandise trade, released in early May.

Year over year, other decreases were reported for fuel oils and crude petroleum, with loadings down 12.5% (-158 000 tonnes) in March, the fifth month of decline in a row.

Finally, loadings of other chemical products and preparations decreased for the sixth consecutive month in March, down 67.9% (-155 000 tonnes) from the same month a year ago, following substantial declines in February (-69.2%) and January (-55.7%).

Chart 3
Railway carloadings, largest commodity differences, March 2021 to March 2022



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

Some energy commodity carloadings going up

Partly offsetting the declines in non-intermodal loadings were large increases in other commodities, most notably, energy products. With the resumption of travel, along with industrial production, global demand for energy has been rising.

The global price for oil and the war in Ukraine may be stoking the demand for coal. For example, loadings of coal grew for the second month in a row in March, up 23.6% (+682 000 tonnes) from March 2021. This increase comes on the heels of a 38.9% growth rate in February.

Similarly, loadings of other refined petroleum and coal products (e.g., propane, butane), which have risen each month since April 2021, grew 59.8% (+228 000 tonnes) in March from the same month in 2021. This followed substantial year-over-year growth in February (+68.7%) and January (+42.9%).

With global aviation activity ramping up amid further easing of travel restrictions, gasoline and aviation turbine fuel rose year over year for a 12th consecutive month, up 45.0% (+70 000 tonnes) in March, the largest such increase since October 2021.

Following a 7.1% dip year over year in February, loadings of iron ores and concentrates—feedstock for the production of steel—picked up again in March, rising 12.6% (+551 000 tonnes), driven by the high demand for steel. As reported earlier in the Monthly Survey of Manufacturing, sales of primary metals grew 19.1% year over year to a record level of $5.8 billion in March.

In March, loadings of plastic and rubber were also up for the first time in eight months, rising by 14.6% (+52 000 tonnes) from the same month in 2021.

Intermodal traffic down again

In March, intermodal shipments—mainly containers—originating in Canada declined year over year for the seventh straight month, falling 9.6% to 3.1 million tonnes this month.

American freight hits another high

In March, freight traffic from connections with US railways once again helped to offset the overall decline in loadings, rising sharply year over year by 20.8% to 4.3 million tonnes. This marked more than one year of growth and the highest tonnage ever recorded for the month of March.

Note to readers

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

Cargo loadings from Armstrong, Ontario, to the Atlantic coast are classified to the eastern division (eastern Canada), while loadings from Thunder Bay, Ontario, to the Pacific coast are classified to the western division (western Canada).

Survey data are revised on a monthly basis to reflect new information.

The data in this release are not seasonally adjusted.

The Transportation Data and Information Hub 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; **infostats@statcan.gc.ca**) or Media Relations (**statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca**).