The Swedish government has decided to upgrade the waterway network. On the fairway to Lake Mälaren in the greater Stockholm region, the locks in Södertalje will be enlarged and modernised. On the fairway to Lake Vänern in the hinterland of Gothenburg, the locks in Lilla Edet, Trollhättan and Vänersborg will be expanded and upgraded. All together, those two projects represent one of the largest ongoing infrastructure investments in Sweden. The new locks in Södertälje are planned to be open for traffic by 2026 while the locks on the fairway to Lake Vänern are scheduled to open after 2030.

Although the Saimaa Canal is technically open to freight traffic, the current geopolitical situation and the resulting insurance difficulties due to the passage through Russian territorial waters represent a significant risk for shipowners and local companies, weakening the business case for investment. Nevertheless, the Saimaa lake area in Finland remains very important for the timber and paper industry, as it is the most efficient and environmentally friendly way to transport large volumes. As lakes are frozen in winter, the transport season is typically 8-9 months. With regular use of icebreakers, navigable routes would also be open in winter, allowing all year round transportation and a significant increase of transport volumes. Icebreakers are currently blocked in the Baltic Sea, so the only viable option is to build new ships at a shipyard in Saimaa.

Inland ports

In Lithuania, the Marvele port in Kaunas, part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), lacks a direct rail connection, hindering intermodal transport options. An estimated €150 million investment is needed to extend the rail network to this port, enhancing its role as a key hub for freight movement between Kaunas and Klaipėda. In Finland, in order to develop multimodal logistics, the timber and paper industry needs more transshipment facilities and onward transport connections.

€0.6 billion
are required to make the inland waterway network of the Baltic area bottleneck-free and to increase climate resilience

"Wood transport in the Lake Saimaa area is crucial for UPM's logistics, as inland waterways reduce the need for longer truck transports. For example, one timber raft replaces 300 trucks, but we definitely need more loading ports and multimodal transport connections for a well-functioning timber logistics system, as well as more ice-breaking capacity to extend the shipping season."
Janne SEILO
Logistics Manager UPM Forest Finland

"Saimaa's waterways are foundationally important to Stora Enso. This largest lake in Finland gives the opportunity to transport raw wood in an environmentally friendly way by floating or by ship to our factories located on the shores of the lake area. Up-to-date infrastructure and suitable equipment are essential to ensure year round transportation via Saimaa waterways which is vital to our business success."
Juha PALOKANGAS
Director Strategy and Local Stakeholders Stora Enso Finland

KEY MESSAGES

- Investment in the region's inland waterway projects constitutes extensive opportunities to enable sustainable transport, economic growth and regional connectivity.
- By addressing the gaps in waterway and port infrastructure, the Baltic Sea Region can significantly benefit and improve its transport efficiency of large bulk volumes, reduce emissions and strengthen trade routes, in line with the objectives of the EU Green Deal.
- Without infrastructure investment, the region risks higher transport costs, deteriorating infrastructure and increased reliance on road freight, contributing to avoidable negative externalities.

Corridor background

The Baltic Sea region is home to historic inland waterway networks in Finland, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden, which were important for regional and international trade. In order to relieve congested land networks and give priority to decarbonising mobility, interest is increasing again to restore their use and develop transport on these existing waterways as they link up the region's most important seaports to the inland hinterland. In Sweden and Poland, the waterway systems are located in densely populated areas. In Finland, they are unmissable arteries for the timber and paper industry. In Lithuania, the waterway is a quick win for the import of raw materials and the export of grain.

Waterway infrastructure

Key bottlenecks in Lithuania's inland waterways include outdated infrastructure and shallow waters, limiting the potential for larger cargo vessels. Notably, the Nemunas River, which connects major industrial hubs, is underutilized due to the absence of a lock system at the Kaunas Hydro Power Plant. Building a lock would unlock connectivity to southern cities like Alytus and Druskininkai, expanding inland waterway access. This investment, estimated at €120 million, would allow continuous waterway transport, reduce road freight, and support Lithuania's transition to a greener logistics chain. In addition, there is potential to deepen the Neris River to improve access for industrial companies and strategic military sites, creating dual-use transport infrastructure for military mobility and civil purpose.

In Poland, mainly the Bydgoszcz Water Junction and the access sections of the Vistula river to the sea ports of Gdańsk and Elbląg are in use, because they meet the requirements for regular transport. The Lower Vistula is at present used for irregular shipments of high added value oversized cargo in the framework of strategic investments in the Baltic region. The competitiveness of the port of Gdańsk would however significantly increase if the Lower Vistula sections would be upgraded in order to allow regular shipments between seaports and hinterland.

Baltic corridor

Baltic corridor

Critical waterway locations