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I would like to take this opportunity to address an event that did not take place in 2005 but hopefully will in 2006 -- trial application of coastal shipping. There is wide consensus on the benefits of coastal shipping: savings in transport cost, easing congestion, savings in fuel, and reduction in air and noise pollution. All these benefits were clearly demonstrated by extensive studies and discussed in numerous conferences.

There are three principal coastal shipping systems: (a) RoPax, fast-speed ferries, combining passengers, cars and trucks; (b) lo-lo, container ships and barges handling international containers; and (c) ro-ro, pure freight ferries, handling domestic trailers and containers on chassis. A feasible coastal system should be competitive with trucks in terms of cost and service level.

Our studies suggested that RoPax ferries could provide the desired service level, but they are much too expensive, especially following the recent hike in fuel cost. This system mainly suits sea-crossing applications as seen in Europe (Mediterranean, Baltic). Lo-lo container ships are also expensive because of their dependency on international terminals with high handling costs and inflexibility (Customs, gates), especially following the recent tightening of security. This system mainly suits feeding of international cargo, which, indeed, is its current U.S. application.

Ro-ro ferries, based on a network of low-cost domestic terminals, are the most suitable for the U.S. coastal application. Because the ro-ro system can handle both domestic trailers, which account for about 80 to 90 percent of the coastal freight, and containers on chassis, it has the potential to meaningfully ease congestion on coastal highways.

The time for studies is over. 2006 is the year the coastal system should proceed to actual experimentation -- a demonstration project