

Imports-export business surges at S. Florida ports

Trade surges 18% through S. Fla. ports

International trade through ports from Palm Beach to Key West is on pace to break new records in 2010.

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After a dismal 2009 — a year those in international business say they'd prefer to forget — trade through South Florida ports is showing double-digit growth in 2010 as the economies of Latin American trading partners revive.

During the first four months of the year, total trade — exports and imports — with several major trading partners was setting records. And trade through the entire Miami Customs District, which includes ports from Palm Beach County to the Keys, is ahead of the levels of 2008 — the best year ever.

"I think 2009 didn't exist. It was a terrible year for all of us," said Tony Ojeda, executive director of Miami-Dade's International Trade Consortium. But this year, he said, "there's a feeling of optimism" when it comes to international trade.

During the first four months of the year, total trade through Miami Customs

District ports was up 18.4 percent to \$29.2 billion, said Ken Roberts, president of WorldCity, a Coral Gables media company that analyzed U.S. Census numbers to spot local trade trends.

Exports jumped by more than 14 percent and imports increased 26.2 percent through April, Roberts said.

WorldCity, in conjunction with the International Trade Consortium, released its annual trade numbers report Wednesday at a conference at the InterContinental West Miami in Doral.

TRADE RECORDS

Countries on track to set new records for total trade with the Miami district this year include the Bahamas, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Haiti, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico and Switzerland, Roberts said.

"The Latin American

region has really suffered much less than the U.S. economy," said Roberts, and purchases are continuing.

Haiti, whose total trade with the Miami district last year was \$839 million, also has been the recipient of millions of dollars worth of additional exports as relief and rebuilding supplies have flowed to the earthquake-ravaged country.

In the first four months of 2010, exports to Haiti through the Miami district totaled \$227.2 million, a 90 percent increase, Roberts said. Charitable goods such as food, clothing and pharmaceuticals accounted for about 46 percent of the increase. Other categories that showed increases were land-line and cellphone equipment, motor vehicles for transporting goods and awnings and tents.

"I see continued growth in intra-American trade" over the next 18 months, "and an increase

by a factor of three of Chinese imports into Latin America," said Hans Toggweiler, chief executive, Americas, of DHL Global Forwarding.

He urged South Florida companies to get more engaged in trade with Latin America and stop allowing China to take away business that could be flowing through local ports.

WorldCity data showed that total trade in 2009 through the Miami Customs District totaled \$79.15 billion — a 12.3 percent decrease.

Still, that was better than the performance of the state and nation. Merchandise trade for Florida fell 21 percent to \$103 billion last year and U.S. trade fell by 23 percent.

The Miami district moved up two spots to rank 11th nationwide because most other Customs Districts around the country fared worse. The top district was Los Angeles with \$282.57 billion in total trade last year — a decline of nearly 21 percent.

Miami district exports — hit by losses in the shipment of motor vehicles, computer chips and heavy equipment — fell to \$49.49 billion.

Still, the trade analysis revealed some interesting twists in export activity. The export of scrap precious metals increased 104 percent last year with virtually all of the scrap being sent to Switzerland. That trade allowed Switzerland to move up to the sixth spot on the Miami district's list of top trading partners. As recently as 2006, it ranked 31st.

GOLD STANDARD

Another category that

appears to be fueled by the recession is gold. Gold — mostly from Colombia, Mexico and Peru — was the Miami Customs District's top import last year as investors flocked to the perceived safety of the precious metal. In fact, Miami was the nation's top gateway for the import of gold. In 2007, gold was the district's No. 15-ranked import.

Total imports through the district reached \$29.7 billion in 2009 — a 16 percent decline — as U.S. companies slowed the pace of their buying during the recession.

While Brazil was still South Florida's top trading partner with \$11.07 billion in total trade last year, the recession took a toll. The import of Brazilian aircraft parts, which have topped \$1 billion in nine of the past 11 years, skidded to \$392.55 million in 2009. Brazil's total trade with the Miami district was down by nearly 16 percent from 2008.

While 2010 trade numbers are looking up, Roberts said just about every American city is pursuing international trade opportunities as a growth strategy.

"You'll see Houston right on the tail of Miami in several categories," he said.

Houston, pointed out Ojeda, has a full-time representative in the Brazilian port of Santos — the busiest container port in Latin America. "We have no one," he said.

Another challenge facing U.S. traders this year is the continued decline of the euro against the dollar. That makes European exports cheaper, theoretically posing more competition for U.S. exports.

Trade facts

Gold was the top import through the Miami Customs District last year. Most of the gold imports came from Colombia, Mexico and Peru.

Computer parts were the fastest growing import (up 134 percent) in 2009. Most came from Intel manufacturing facilities in Costa Rica.

Brazil remained South Florida's top trading partner, accounting for \$11.07 billion in two-way trade.

Switzerland was South Florida's No. 6 trading partner last year, moving up the ranks from No. 31 in 2006. What made the difference? Precious metal scrap. Exports increased 104.5 percent and just about all of the precious metal scrap headed to Switzerland.

SOURCE: WorldCity analysis of U.S. Census data

Top 10 Exports and Imports through the Miami Customs District (2009)

EXPORTS

Rank	Product	Value	% Change
1.	Aircraft, jet engines & parts	\$4.97 billion	7.17
2.	Scrap precious metal	\$3.05 billion	104.52
3.	Computers	\$3.04 billion	-10.97
4.	Landline, cellphone equip.	\$2.86 billion	-6.47
5.	Computer parts	\$2.26 billion	-0.71
6.	Electronic integrated circuits	\$1.32 billion	-29.22
7.	Medical instruments	\$1.2 billion	-4.8
8.	Printers, parts	\$1.01 billion	-13.03
9.	Motor vehicles	\$875.2 million	-40.95
10.	Camcorders, digital cameras	\$774.1 million	-27.2

IMPORTS

Rank	Product	Value	% Change
1.	Gold	\$2.13 billion	85.82
2.	Oil, not crude	\$1.95 billion	-51.34
3.	Imports of returned exports	\$1.27 billion	3.45
4.	Computer parts	\$1.2 billion	134.03
5.	Landline, cellphone equip.	\$1.07 billion	2.52
6.	Sweaters, pullovers, knits	\$1.06 billion	-10.43
7.	T-shirts, tank tops	\$987.5 million	-15.54
8.	Aircraft engines, parts	\$847.3 million	11.55
9.	Fish fillets	\$764.5 million	-14.52
10.	Medical instruments	\$673.2 million	54

SOURCE: WorldCity analysis of U.S. Census data

Still, Ojeda said that new opportunities are also opening up. Taiwan, he said, plans to bring a 40-member delegation to Miami-Dade in September.

"They are very interested in establishing a foothold here in Miami to serve as their gateway to Latin America," he said. "Now they want to put us in the loop."