



THE DEFINITIVE SHIPPER'S GUIDE

The Complete Guide to *Intermodal Freight*

How to cut long-haul shipping costs 20–30%
without sacrificing service, reliability, or control.

- What intermodal actually is — and how a load really moves
- How to qualify your freight and calculate real savings
- 40', 45', and 53' containers fully explained
- The 7 questions to ask any intermodal provider
- US–Canada cross-border shipping decoded
- The East Coast Repositioning Program explained
- Your first 90 days on intermodal — what to expect

Direct IMC

This guide was written for logistics managers, transportation directors, and supply chain professionals who want straight answers — not sales pitches. Every chapter gives you information you can use, whether you ship with LaserNet Jax or not.

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CHAPTER ONE

What Intermodal Actually Is

Plain English. No jargon. No engineering degree required.

The word "intermodal" intimidates people. It sounds technical — the kind of thing that lives in railroad contracts and logistics conferences. But the concept itself is remarkably simple, and once you understand it, you'll wonder why you haven't been using it for years.

Intermodal freight is the movement of a single sealed container using two or more modes of transportation — most commonly truck and rail — without ever unloading the cargo between modes. Your freight goes into a container at pickup. It stays in that container the entire journey. It comes out at delivery.

How a Typical Intermodal Load Actually Moves

Here's a real-world example. You're shipping palletized manufactured goods from Atlanta, Georgia to Chicago, Illinois — approximately 720 miles. On OTR trucking, a driver picks up the load and delivers door-to-door in about 14 hours. On intermodal, the move looks like this:

- ✓ **Day 1 — Origin Drayage:** A local drayage truck delivers an empty 53' container to your facility. Your team loads it exactly like a standard dry van trailer. The container goes to the Atlanta rail ramp.
- ✓ **Day 1–2 — Rail Move:** Your container is lifted onto a railcar and departs on the next train. The 720-mile lane runs on CSX or Norfolk Southern track, often overnight.
- ✓ **Day 3 — Destination Drayage:** Your container arrives at the Chicago rail ramp. A local drayage truck picks it up and delivers it to your consignee.

KEY INSIGHT

Your freight never changes hands during the rail portion. The container is sealed from origin to destination — which is why intermodal typically has **lower damage rates than OTR**. Fewer handling points, fewer opportunities for something to go wrong.

What Is an IMC — And Why It Matters

An **Intermodal Marketing Company (IMC)** holds direct contracts with Class I railroads, then sells intermodal services to shippers. Think of an IMC as your single point of contact for the entire move — origin drayage, the rail portion, and destination drayage — all coordinated through one provider who picks up the phone when you call.

This is meaningfully different from a freight broker, who typically doesn't hold direct railroad contracts and instead marks up rates they obtain from IMCs. That markup shows up on your freight bill every single load.

15

IMCs in the entire US with direct contracts across Class I railroads across North America

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Class I railroads operating in the US and Canada combined

\$0

Broker markup when you work with a true IMC directly

What "Drayage" Means

Drayage is the short-haul trucking portion — the leg between your facility and the rail ramp at origin, and between the destination ramp and your consignee. It is the "first mile and last mile" of every intermodal move. The quality of your IMC's drayage relationships is one of the most critical factors in intermodal reliability. An IMC with 25+ years of railroad relationships and 18+ years of carrier relationships at every major ramp nationwide is a fundamentally different partner than one that started offering intermodal last year.

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CHAPTER TWO

Is Intermodal Right for Your Freight?

The honest qualification checklist — including when the answer is no.

Not every load belongs on intermodal. Any provider who tells you otherwise is selling, not advising. The honest answer depends on four key factors: lane distance, freight type, time sensitivity, and volume.

Factor 1: Lane Distance

Distance is the single most important variable. Intermodal has a structural cost advantage on long lanes because rail dramatically reduces fuel and labor costs compared to OTR — but drayage at each end has a fixed cost that doesn't shrink. The shorter the lane, the more drayage eats into your savings.

THE DISTANCE RULE

Under 500 miles: OTR almost always wins. Drayage consumes the rail savings.

500–750 miles: Borderline. Evaluate case by case with ramp optimization.

750+ miles: Intermodal consistently beats OTR on cost. The longer, the better.

1,500+ miles: Transcontinental lanes are where intermodal wins most decisively.

Factor 2: Freight Type

Intermodal is designed for dry van freight that fits in a 40', 45', or 53' container. If your freight ships in a standard dry van trailer today, it is almost certainly intermodal-eligible.

- ✓ Palletized manufactured goods and industrial products
- ✓ Consumer goods, retail merchandise, e-commerce distribution
- ✓ Automotive parts, components, and assemblies
- ✓ Agricultural commodities and packaged food products
- ✓ Building materials, paper, plastics, and packaging

Intermodal is not suitable for:

- ✗ Temperature-controlled freight without specialized equipment
- ✗ Oversized or overweight loads requiring flatbed trailers
- ✗ Hazardous materials requiring special handling documentation
- ✗ Freight requiring live unload or driver-assist services

Factor 3: Time Sensitivity

Intermodal typically runs **1–2 days longer than OTR** on the same lane. This is not a dealbreaker for most planned freight — but it matters for just-in-time manufacturing and expedited shipments.

PRACTICAL REALITY

Most shippers who switch to intermodal do so on their **planned, steady-state lanes** — freight that replenishes inventory or supplies production lines on a predictable schedule. They keep OTR for urgent loads. **This hybrid approach captures the savings where they're largest without sacrificing flexibility.**

Factor 4: Volume

Intermodal works for shippers of almost any volume, but the savings are most impactful with consistent lane volume. Even 5–10 loads per month on a qualifying lane can generate meaningful annual savings. At 20, 30, or 50 loads per month, the numbers become transformative.

QUICK QUALIFICATION CHECKLIST

- ✓ My lane is 750 miles or longer
- ✓ My freight is dry van — palletized or boxed
- ✓ My freight can tolerate a 1–2 day additional transit window
- ✓ I have predictable, recurring volume on this lane
- ✓ I'm paying OTR rates I believe could be significantly lower

If you checked three or more of these, intermodal is worth a serious conversation. If you checked all five, you're almost certainly leaving money on the table right now.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Math: How 20–30% Savings Actually Happens

Real numbers. Real scenarios. No rounding in your favor.

The 20–30% savings figure gets thrown around a lot in intermodal marketing. Here's where it actually comes from — and what it looks like on real freight budgets.

Why Rail Costs Less on Long Lanes

A single intermodal train can carry the equivalent of **280 trucks** worth of freight. The fuel cost per ton-mile on rail is a fraction of highway transportation. Railroads don't pay driver wages, don't run out of hours-of-service, and don't carry the same insurance costs as trucking fleets. On long lanes, these structural economics translate directly into lower rates for shippers.

The drayage cost is essentially fixed regardless of how far the freight travels on rail. So the longer your lane, the larger the rail portion as a percentage of the total move — and the bigger the advantage over OTR.

A Real Savings Calculation

A manufacturer shipping palletized goods from Charlotte, NC to Chicago, IL — approximately 740 miles, 30 loads per month.

CHARLOTTE → CHICAGO · 740 MILES · 30 LOADS/MONTH

Current OTR all-in rate per load **\$3,200**

Estimated intermodal rate (direct IMC) **\$2,400**

Savings per load **\$800 (25%)**

Monthly savings (30 loads) **\$24,000**

Annual savings **\$288,000**

"\$288,000 in annual savings on a single lane. That's not a rounding error — that's a strategic advantage."

BASED ON TYPICAL SOUTHEAST → MIDWEST INTERMODAL RATES · LASERNET JAX 2026

Why IMC Rates Beat Broker Rates

If you've gotten intermodal quotes before and they weren't compelling, there's a good chance you were quoted broker rates, not IMC-direct rates.

Rate Source	Direct IMC (LaserNet Jax)	Freight Broker
Railroad contract	✓ Direct with railroad	Via IMC or intermediary
Markup layers	✓ Zero — one margin only	Two or more markups stacked
Capacity access	✓ Direct railroad allocation	Subject to IMC availability
Issue resolution	✓ Direct railroad relationship	Through intermediary chain
Rate stability	✓ Contract-based pricing	Subject to spot market swings

The Ramp Optimization Factor

Most shippers don't realize that ramp selection has a significant impact on both cost and transit time. An experienced IMC analyzes ramp options on every shipment, sometimes routing through a different terminal to save \$100–\$200 per load. At 30 loads per month, that's an additional \$36,000–\$72,000 in annual savings that most providers never find.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Choosing the Right Intermodal Partner

The 7 questions every shipper should ask before committing.

Not all intermodal providers are created equal — and the differences aren't always obvious from a website or a sales call. Here's how to evaluate any provider you're considering.

IMC vs. Broker vs. Carrier Direct

Direct IMC: Holds direct contracts with Class I railroads. Accesses capacity at the source. One margin between you and the railroad. LaserNet Jax is a direct IMC in the US with direct railroad contracts plus access to the full North American rail network.

Freight Broker: Does not hold railroad contracts. Buys capacity from an IMC and marks it up before selling to you — typically 8–15% more expensive. When problems arise, resolution goes through an extra layer.

Carrier Direct: Possible for very high-volume shippers, but requires dedicated staff, minimum volume commitments, and expertise most shippers don't have internally. Also doesn't include drayage coordination.

The 7 Questions to Ask Any Intermodal Provider

Q Do you hold direct contracts with Class I railroads, or do you purchase capacity through another IMC?

A direct IMC will say yes confidently and name the railroads. A broker will often deflect or use vague language like "we have strong railroad relationships."

Q Which Class I railroads do you have direct contracts with?

The answer should include CSX, Norfolk Southern, Union Pacific, CN Rail, and CP Rail for truly comprehensive coverage. Fewer railroad contracts means limited reach and potential capacity gaps.

Q Who is my dedicated point of contact, and will it be the same person every time?

This matters more than most shippers realize. Large brokers rotate reps and use call centers. A true specialist knows your business and picks up the phone when you call.

Q How do you handle drayage — do you have established carrier relationships or use a load board?

Established drayage relationships at rail ramps are the difference between a container that moves and one that sits. Ask how long they've worked with their drayage carriers.

Q Do you perform ramp optimization, or do you default to the nearest terminal?

Most providers take the path of least resistance. An experienced IMC analyzes alternative ramps that might save you money or transit time on every shipment.

Q What is your process when something goes wrong?

Problems happen in intermodal just as in OTR. A provider with direct railroad access can solve problems a broker simply cannot. Ask for a specific example.

Q Can you provide references from shippers on lanes similar to mine?

Any provider worth working with should be able to connect you with current customers who ship similar lanes. If they can't, ask why.

LASERNET JAX ANSWERS EVERY ONE OF THESE QUESTIONS

Direct contracts with five Class I Railroads. One dedicated point of contact who knows your business. Railroad relationships since the early 2000s. Drayage relationships built over 18+ years. Ramp optimization on every load. Quotes back within minutes. Call us and ask anything on this list — we welcome it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Container Guide: 40', 45', and 53'

What fits where, what they cost, and the East Coast Repositioning Program.

Intermodal uses three primary container sizes for domestic and cross-border freight. Choosing the right one affects your cost, capacity, and eligibility for special programs.

40' STANDARD CONTAINER		45' EXTENDED CONTAINER		53' DOMESTIC CONTAINER	
Int. Length	39 ft 5 in	Int. Length	44 ft 4 in	Int. Length	52 ft 6 in
Int. Width	7 ft 8 in	Int. Width	7 ft 8 in	Int. Width	8 ft 2 in
Int. Height	7 ft 10 in	Int. Height	7 ft 10 in	Int. Height	9 ft 2 in
Volume	2,350 cu ft	Volume	2,660 cu ft	Volume	3,940 cu ft
Max Payload	44,000 lbs	Max Payload	44,000 lbs	Max Payload	45,000 lbs
Pallets (48×40)	20–22	Pallets (48×40)	23–25	Pallets (48×40)	26–30

Which Container Should You Use?

The **53' domestic container** is the most common choice for US intermodal. It matches the dimensions of a standard 53' OTR dry van trailer, making it the most intuitive transition for shippers converting from trucking. If your freight fills a 53' trailer today, it will fill a 53' container.

The **40' and 45' containers** are standard ISO sizes used for international shipping and US–Canada cross-border intermodal. They are also the only containers eligible for the East Coast Repositioning Program.

The East Coast Repositioning Program — Explained

This is one of the most valuable and least-known opportunities in domestic intermodal — and LaserNet Jax participates directly in it.

Railroads periodically need to move 40' and 45' containers from East Coast rail ramps back to their West Coast hubs, where demand for outbound international shipping is highest. To fill that equipment efficiently, they offer deeply discounted rates to shippers whose freight is moving westbound. The railroad gets their containers repositioned. You get an exceptional rate that isn't available anywhere else.

WHO QUALIFIES

Shippers with freight originating on the East Coast (FL, GA, NC, SC, VA, MD, NY, NJ, PA and surrounding states) destined for one of these five West Coast ramps:

Los Angeles

California

Oakland

California

Portland

Oregon



Seattle

Washington



Vancouver BC

Canada

Savings on repositioning lanes regularly exceed 30% versus comparable OTR rates. Most shippers moving East-to-West have never been told this program exists. If your freight moves in this direction, call us specifically about repositioning before your next booking.

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CHAPTER SIX

US-Canada Cross-Border Intermodal

The complexity most providers hide from you — decoded.

US-Canada cross-border intermodal is one of the most cost-effective freight solutions available for shippers moving between the two countries — and one of the most misunderstood. Many shippers avoid it because it seems complicated. Most of that complexity, handled by the right provider, is entirely invisible to you.

Why Cross-Border Intermodal Is Different

- ✓ **Railroad** Cross-border moves transition between US Class I railroads (CSX, NS, UP) and Canadian **handoff:** Class I railroads (CN or CP). This requires interline agreements and seamless coordination between carriers.
- ✓ **Customs** Every cross-border shipment requires proper customs clearance on both sides. Delays **documentation:** here are expensive — a container sitting at the border waiting on paperwork is a container not delivering on time.
- ✓ **Drayage on both sides:** You need reliable drayage carriers with cross-border experience at both the US origin ramp and the Canadian destination ramp.
- ✓ **Currency and billing:** Rate quotes and invoicing may span both USD and CAD depending on the move and provider.

Major US-Canada Intermodal Lanes

US Origin Region	Canadian Destinations	Railroad(s)	Typical Savings
Southeast (FL, GA, TN)	✓ Toronto • Montreal	CSX / CN	18–22%
Midwest (IL, OH, MI)	✓ Toronto • Calgary	NS / CP	20–25%
Northeast (NY, PA, NJ)	✓ Montreal • Toronto	CSX / CN	18–22%
Any US City	✓ Vancouver BC	UP / CP	20–28%

What to Look for in a Cross-Border Provider

- ✓ Direct contracts with both CN and CP Rail — not just US Class I railroads
- ✓ Established customs broker relationships or in-house customs expertise
- ✓ Proven drayage carrier networks at Canadian destination ramps
- ✓ Experience handling border documentation for your specific commodity type
- ✓ A single point of contact who manages the entire move — not separate US and Canada teams

"The US-Canada moves we were dreading turned out to be the smoothest freight we've ever shipped. Two years in — every cross-border load goes through LaserNet Jax."

S. PATEL · OPERATIONS MANAGER · AGRICULTURAL EXPORTER

LaserNet Jax holds direct contracts with both CN and CP Rail and has managed thousands of cross-border intermodal moves. The complexity that intimidates other providers is routine for us. If you ship between the US and Canada and you're not using intermodal, you're almost certainly overpaying.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sustainability Case for Intermodal

Lower costs and lower emissions — it's not a trade-off. It's intermodal.

For most of freight history, sustainability and cost savings were in tension. You could choose the greener option, or the cheaper option — rarely both. Intermodal is one of the few places in logistics where those goals are genuinely aligned. Switching long-haul OTR lanes to intermodal cuts your freight spend and your carbon footprint simultaneously.

4×

More fuel-efficient than OTR trucking
per ton-mile

75%

Fewer greenhouse gas emissions per
ton-mile vs. highway freight

280

Trucks worth of freight moved by a
single intermodal train

These numbers come from the Association of American Railroads and are widely cited by the EPA's SmartWay Transport Partnership. Rail's efficiency advantage comes from physics — steel wheels on steel rails have dramatically lower rolling resistance than rubber tires on asphalt, and a single locomotive can move the equivalent of hundreds of trucks.

What This Means for ESG Reporting

Transportation emissions — primarily the Scope 3 category in corporate sustainability reporting — are one of the largest and most difficult carbon sources for manufacturing and distribution companies to address. Most Scope 3 reduction strategies require capital investment in facilities, equipment, or processes. Switching freight to intermodal requires none of those things. It requires a phone call.

For logistics managers being asked by their C-suite to show measurable sustainability progress, intermodal conversion is one of the fastest, most auditable moves available. The emissions reduction is real, calculable, and can be reported in annual sustainability disclosures.

EPA SMARTWAY PARTNERSHIP

The EPA's SmartWay Transport Partnership recognizes intermodal freight as one of the most effective ways for shippers to reduce transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions. Switching 30 loads per month from OTR to intermodal on a 1,000-mile lane can eliminate **hundreds of metric tons of CO2 equivalent annually** — with zero capital investment required.

How to Calculate Your Emissions Reduction

For a rough estimate: every load you convert from OTR to intermodal on a long-haul lane reduces transportation emissions for that load by approximately 65–75%. On a 30-load-per-month lane running 1,000 miles, this can represent 400–600 metric tons of CO2 equivalent per year.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Intermodal gives you a rare gift in business: a decision that is simultaneously the financially superior choice and the environmentally responsible choice. **You save money. You reduce emissions. You help your company hit its sustainability targets.** There is no downside for qualifying freight on qualifying lanes.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Your First 90 Days on Intermodal

How to start, what to expect, and how to measure success.

The most common reason logistics managers haven't converted qualifying lanes to intermodal isn't skepticism — it's inertia. OTR is familiar. The process is known. What follows is a practical guide to making the transition with confidence, starting small, and scaling once you've seen it work.

Step 1: Identify Your Pilot Lane

Don't start by converting everything. Find your best candidate — a lane that is 750+ miles, has 5–10+ loads per month, carries freight with a 1–3 day transit buffer, and is currently more expensive than it should be. Run intermodal alongside OTR on that lane for 30–60 days. The data will make the scale-up decision easy.

Step 2: Understand the Booking Process

- ✓ **Book early:** Intermodal trains run on schedules. Booking 2–3 days ahead is ideal.
- ✓ **Container delivery:** Your drayage carrier delivers an empty container to your facility. You load it exactly like a dry van.
- ✓ **Pickup and ramp drop:** The drayage carrier picks up the loaded container and delivers it to the rail ramp. Your IMC handles everything from there.
- ✓ **Transit and tracking:** Your container moves by rail. Track it through your IMC contact.
- ✓ **Destination delivery:** Drayage picks up at the destination ramp and delivers to your consignee.

Step 3: Set Internal Expectations

The most common friction when introducing intermodal is internal — operations teams or production schedules built around OTR transit times. Before your first load, communicate clearly: intermodal will add 1–2 days to transit time, booking needs to happen 2–3 days earlier, and container loading is identical to a dry van. Then tell them the savings number.

PRO TIP

Lead with the annual savings number — not the per-load savings. "We'll save \$280,000 this year on this one lane" lands very differently than "we'll save \$800 per load." Same number. Very different reaction.

Step 4: Measure the Right Things

- ✓ **Cost per load vs. OTR:** Is the savings matching the quote?
- ✓ **On-time delivery rate:** Is intermodal meeting delivery windows?
- ✓ **Damage rate:** Are you seeing fewer claims vs. OTR?
- ✓ **Internal friction:** Are your operations teams adapting smoothly?

Step 5: Scale With Confidence

Once you've validated intermodal on the pilot lane, work with your LaserNet Jax contact to identify the next 2–3 qualifying lanes. Build a rolling savings projection. Present it to leadership with actual performance data from the pilot. The shippers who benefit most aren't those who dive in all at once — they're the ones who start smart, validate the model, and convert lane by lane as the data builds.

"We converted 40 loads a month from OTR to intermodal and the savings paid for a new hire. John's team handled every detail."

D. MARTINEZ · LOGISTICS DIRECTOR · MIDWEST MANUFACTURER



Intermodal Freight Simplified. *Service Amplified.*

You've read the guide. Now let's talk about your lanes.
Quotes back within minutes. One dedicated point of contact. Always.

Ready to see the savings?

Tell us your lane — we'll have real numbers back to you
fast.

Call **(904) 551-7544**

o Email **john@lsrnetjax.com**

Web **lsrnetjax.com**

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