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Steeped in history, the port of Wilmington is firmly focused on the future

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PORT OF WILMINGTON, DE — The modern port of Wilmington, DE, was founded in 1923, but its origins stretch back to 1638, when Swedish settlers landed close to the site where the port now stands and built Fort Christina, the oldest permanent European settlement on the Delaware River.

Clearly, much has changed in the intervening centuries. Today's port of Wilmington is the top-ranked North American port for fresh fruit imports and juice concentrate, and has one of the larger dockside cold-storage facilities in the United States. Each year, more than 1.5 million tons of bananas, pineapples, grapes, deciduous fruit out of Chile and Argentina, and citrus from Morocco are offloaded at the port.



Chilean fruit pallets offloaded at the port of Wilmington this past winter. “We’re the banana capital of North America and the second-largest banana port in the world,” said Tom Keefer, deputy executive director of the state-owned Diamond State Port Corp.

While the Port is renowned for handling fresh fruit, juice and automobiles, its capabilities are myriad. Mr. Keefer knows that on any given day there is no telling what he may see from his office window, from convoys of specialized trucks carrying cattle for export to the most-recent business, a shipment of giant wind turbine blades for a wind farm project in southern Pennsylvania.

The port of Wilmington has distinct advantages as the closest port up the Delaware River from the Atlantic Ocean, just four hours away. But there are other competitive advantages as well, Mr. Keefer explained.

“We’ve got excellent labor, the largest on-dock refrigerated warehouse capacity of any terminal in the United States and we’ve got two independent stevedoring companies,” Mr. Keefer said. “So from a price standpoint, we can be very competitive. And because we are an employer and operate all our own warehouses, we can also be very competitive in the warehousing and storage and truck-loading areas. We have significant experience in cold treatment; several of our warehouses are certified by USDA for cold treatment. We’ve got great connectivity to the interstate system — less than half a mile out of the gate you can be going north and south via interstates 495 and 95, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike takes you west. We tell our customers that when their trucks leave the port of Wilmington they don’t hit another traffic light until they’re coming off the interstate to deliver to market. And the port is also served by two Class 1 railroads.”

An automated, web-based, real-time inventory management system lets customers keep track of product at the port from anywhere in the world and around the clock. That same system helps the Port consistently reach its goal of getting trucks on and off the terminal in 45 minutes “and we track that,” Mr. Keefer said.

The port’s busiest season is mid-October through early May, but “we could do more,” Mr. Keefer said. “Mid-summer is our slower season. We really would like to grow our business with Southern Hemisphere citrus this time of year, and we can do it very cost effectively.”

The port is also ready and willing to work with any shipper looking to move goods into or out of the United States.

“We’ve got some very clever and experienced people on our team, and we’d love to hear from customers and develop logistic solutions that work for them, and we’re very successful in doing that,” he said. “We have many long-time relationships with customers. They like the port of Wilmington, they like the atmosphere, they feel like it’s family here, and that type of relationship is really fostered here. We can make decisions and execute them very quickly. A customer comes to us with a problem, we bring people together and come up with a solution and boom — we implement it. We talk about Team Wilmington to our customers, and we really do believe in and stand by that concept.

“We’re looking for new opportunities where ever they may present themselves,” he said. “We’re pretty versatile. We go after whatever is out there that we think fits our strong points. We’re out there visiting with customers, attending all the different trade shows, so we’re out there. What we try to do is continue to find opportunities to add value to our traditional services — we do expediting, inland logistics coordination, we’ve taken on rapid cooling — another value-added service we instituted during the 2010-2011 Chilean season.”

With ongoing deepening of the Delaware River and eventual expansion of the Panama Canal, the port of Wilmington is keeping all options open moving forward. Several companies have expressed interest in forming a public-private partnership with the port to possibly build a 125-acre container terminal “that would give us a unique opportunity in the general cargo liner shipping area where we don’t have a lot of exposure now, create a lot of jobs and have a significant impact on the region,” Mr. Keefer said. “It’s a \$300-\$500 million project and it could be done in three to four years, maybe faster.”

“We’re doing the things we need to do to make ourselves as attractive a business partner as we can,” he said. “We continue to work on our productivity, we continue to work to improve our facilities, we continue to work to attract new business and we continue to work on trying to find ways to add more value to the service we provide our customers. We think that’s pretty good winning combination in terms of setting the table for the future.”

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