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Forum discusses planning for a disaster at the ports

Other facilities would step in for a time, but a quick recovery is vital, officials say.

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Staff Writer

Decades of round-the-clock economic activity have shaped the sprawling Long Beach-Los Angeles seaport into America's premier doorway for international trade.

So what happens if that door slams shut in the wake of a natural disaster or terrorist attack?

The answer is incomplete, but industry and public sector leaders are working to develop a more cohesive plan to keep the supply chain intact following a serious disruption.

"There's obviously a great deal of pressure," said John M. Holmes, deputy executive director of operations at the Port of Los Angeles, who joined fellow port executives from Long Beach, Los Angeles and New Orleans on Friday for a daylong forum on the port's ability to continue functioning after a potential event.

"If L.A.-Long Beach went down, all the ports on the West Coast, including those in Canada and Mexico, couldn't handle the overflow. We have to think about how we get these ports back on track."

In the past 25 years, nations bordering the Pacific have come to rely on Southern California ports for the movement of key commodities like oil, food, machinery, vehicles, lumber, electronics and steel.

A prolonged disruption here could throw the world economy into turmoil, as was witnessed during a 10-day labor lockout of San Pedro Bay dockworkers in 2002. The incident cost the U.S. economy \$1 billion to \$2 billion per day and was rumored to have caused the collapse of numerous Asian-based manufacturers.

"The challenges of 2002 showed just how important this complex was," said Dick Steinke, Port of Long Beach executive director. "But it also showed how fragile the system can be."

The forum, hosted by FuturePorts, a Wilmington-based shipping and construction trade organization, provided a forum for private businesses to share their recovery plans with public sectors.

Judging by comments made Friday, most retailers have a backup plan.

Oil companies have also developed alternative destinations for some of the 200 million-plus barrels they ship into the Port of Long Beach annually.

More vulnerable, it appears, are rail operators and trucking firms, which rely heavily on public roadways, bridges and other infrastructure under the jurisdiction of local, state and federal agencies.

"I'm extremely concerned about this," said Councilwoman Janice Hahn, whose district includes the L.A. port. "We've spent so much energy trying to protect ourselves from a security disaster, but when you look at the economic impact of the ports, it's vital that we have a plan to get things moving again in the wake of an event."

She pointed out that a recent bomb threat at the Vincent Thomas Bridge shut down a key roadway connecting San Pedro and Terminal Island for several hours.

"I know there's a recovery plan in place, but we need to make sure that they have the right plan which looks at getting contractors, dredging, dockworkers and others back on the job as soon and as safely possible," Hahn said.

Leaders acknowledged that much planning remains.

Port of Long Beach Harbor Commissioner Mike Walter urged private and public leaders to coordinate more security drills, information sharing and cooperative planning.

"None of us alone is as smart as all of us together," Walter said, quoting an old adage.

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