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Low Rhine Water Levels Cut Cargo Shipments

Shallow stretches south of Duisburg and Cologne are forcing barges to sail partly loaded, raising freight costs across central Europe.

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Low water levels on the Rhine River in Germany are forcing cargo vessels to sail only partly loaded, raising freight costs and threatening the movement of commodities that depend on one of Europe’s most important inland shipping routes.

After several dry days, water levels have fallen enough to disrupt traffic on stretches of the river south of Duisburg and Cologne, including the narrow passage at Kaub, where traders said ships can carry only about 50% of their normal load. In northern sections, vessels are sailing at about 60% to 70% capacity, depending on the type of ship.

The Rhine is a key route for grains, minerals, ores, coal and oil products, including heating oil. When water is too shallow, shipping companies add surcharges to standard freight rates because vessels cannot move as much cargo in a single trip. Cargo owners then face higher transport costs, and some shipments must be divided among several boats, adding further expense.

Traders said rain is forecast over the next week in the river’s catchment areas, which could bring some relief if it reaches the basin in time and in enough volume to lift water levels. For now, however, the low water is already affecting logistics along the river and reviving concerns about supply disruptions similar to those seen in the summer of 2022, when drought and heat led to unusually low Rhine levels and caused bottlenecks for German industry.

The situation matters not only for bulk commodities but also for energy supplies moving into Germany ahead of periods of higher demand. Heating oil shipments are among those affected when barges cannot sail fully loaded, making each trip less efficient and more expensive.

Shipping on the Rhine is closely watched by traders because changes in water depth can quickly alter transport costs across central Europe. Even short periods of low water can ripple through supply chains by slowing deliveries and forcing companies to adjust inventories, routing and pricing.