

# Victory in Spanish permits dispute

Spanish transport authorities have backed down in their attempts to enforce changes in the country's exceptional transport regulations that discriminated against international hauliers.

The move follows a series of complaints made to the European Commission and the Spanish government from ESTA, the International Road Transport Union (IRU) and a host of national trade bodies.

One of the most vocal critics of Spain's action was TLN, the Dutch Association for Transport and Logistics and a leading ESTA member.

Ambro Smit, TLN's policy advisor on technical affairs, said: "We are very pleased that Spain has been forced by the Commission to change this absurd and discriminatory regulation.

"All our lobby work to end this ridiculous situation has paid off. We now have the same exemption conditions as Spanish hauliers. And that's the way it should be. "

The Spanish u-turn effectively means that from this June the rules have reverted to what they were before the change. Many in the industry have been surprised at how quickly the situation has been resolved.

The dispute first arose in April last year when Spain unexpectedly changed the rules governing long-term and special permits in ways that seriously disadvantaged non-Spanish companies, raising their costs and causing delays and unnecessary bureaucracy.

The Spanish authorities decreed that long-term permits would in future only be available for Spanish hauliers, not international firms.

In addition, for international firms only, short-term permits that had previously been valid for up to 25 trucks and trailers would in future only be valid for a single truck and a maximum of 25 trailers.

The change had the impact of reducing the viability of operating in Spain for firms from the rest of Europe and forcing international business working in the country to be increasingly reliant on subcontracting the transit of project cargo to local transportation firms.

An official complaint was lodged at the end of last year with the European Commission, but the Spanish authorities argued that the changes were acceptable under European regulations.

However, after a second complaint was taken up by Brussels, the Spanish authorities backed down, a move that has been widely welcomed both for the decision itself and the speed with which it was taken.

David Collett, ESTA President and Managing Director of the Collett Group, said the dispute reflected growing concern at the rise of protectionist measures throughout Europe and the bureaucratic burden faced by the heavy transport sector.

“The difficulties regarding permit granting in the transport industry remain as entrenched as ever. The situation in Spain was an example of the type of difficulties being faced.

“Increasingly, in many European countries, we see a lot of “new” or revived national regulations and documentation.

“But a plethora of different national rules and regulations makes the industry less safe, less competitive and puts up costs for our clients – and ultimately the end users, the general public.”

He continued: "At ESTA we will continue to lobby for EU member states to adopt the European Best Practice Guidelines for Abnormal Road Transport, published by the European Commission's Transport Directive."

Crucially, the directive contains SERT, the Special European Registration for Trucks and Trailers, intended to reduce the paperwork and bureaucracy faced by the industry.

"But the simple truth is that we have struggled to persuade national governments to adopt it – although we will keep arguing the case," Collett added.