

## **A Bill of Lading’s Journey Through Europe: A Full FCL Process Breakdown from Rotterdam Port to Final Customs Clearance**

Hello everyone!

Today, we will break down a core logistics process that most cross-border sellers care about but often find unfamiliar—**how a ‘full container load (FCL)’ moves from arrival at a European port all the way to final customs clearance and cargo release.**

Using Europe’s largest port—‘**Port of Rotterdam**’—as an example, we’ll follow the journey from the perspective of a ‘Bill of Lading (B/L)’. Once you understand this route, the European leg of your FCL shipments will become crystal clear.

### **Stage 1: The Pre-Arrival Alert**

## — Arrival Notice (AN)

After sailing across the ocean for several weeks, about **5–7** days before berthing, the carrier will issue an **Arrival Notice** to the consignee or their designated freight forwarder. This notice serves as the official preview confirming your cargo is about to land.

## Stage 2: The Critical Step — ‘Document Exchange’

### —Obtaining the Right to Take Delivery

Once the vessel berths, the first key operation is ‘**document exchange**’ .

Using the **Original Bill of Lading**, Telex Release, or Sea Waybill, the consignee contacts the carrier, settles outstanding charges (such as ocean freight, THC, etc.), and obtains the **Delivery Order (D/O)**.

At this stage, the carrier also updates cargo rights in the ‘Port

base' system, digitally authorizing the pickup party. This authorization is the essential pass required for container release.

### **Common Scenarios for Document Exchange**

#### **1. Direct Consignee Release**

If the consignee listed on the B/L pays charges directly, D/O can be issued immediately.

#### **2. Consignee Authorization**

If the consignee is the end customer, they may authorize a freight forwarder to complete payment and process D/O on their behalf.

#### **3. Forwarder-to-Forwarder Authorization**

If a primary forwarder authorizes a secondary local forwarder, an authorization letter is required, and the authorized party settles charges and retrieves the D/O.

### **Stage 3: Customs Review & Tax Assessment**

In the Netherlands, customs clearance is highly digitalized. The customs broker submits the declaration based on your Commercial Invoice, Packing List, and other required documentation.

#### **Tariff Classification:**

Customs determines applicable duty rates based on the **HS code**.

#### **Tax Calculation:**

The system automatically calculates **import duties** and **Import VAT**.

#### **Release Documents:**

After clearance approval, two essential documents are generated:

#### **IMA File:**

Uploaded by the broker into the Portbase system, indicating the goods have successfully ‘passed customs.’

**UTB File:**

Lists the customs value, duty rate, and payable tax amounts—crucial for your financial reconciliation.

**Stage 4: Terminal Operations**

**— Truck Appointment & Container Release**

After customs ‘unlocks’ the cargo, port release must also be completed:

**Carrier Release:**

The shipping line (or its agent) performs electronic release in the system.

**Customs Release:**

Enabled simultaneously with the IMA file.

**Trucking Authorization & Appointment:**

The consignee/forwarder authorizes a trucking company in Portbase (or other port systems). The trucking company then books a specific **time slot for container pickup**.

### **Gate-in Pickup:**

The trucker enters the terminal at the appointed time and collects the container.

### **Stage 5: Final Delivery**

#### **— Unstuffing & Empty Return**

Once the full container arrives at the final warehouse:

#### **Unstuffing & Inspection:**

The warehouse verifies the **container seal number** matches the B/L, opens the container, counts the goods, and checks for any transport damage.

#### **Timely Empty Return:**

The empty container must be returned to the designated depot **within the free demurrage/detention period** (usually 7–14 days) to avoid detention charges.

### **Process Summary Diagram**

Original diagram omitted — but the flow is:

Arrival → Document Exchange (D/O) → Customs Declaration and Release → Truck Appointment and Container Release → Unstuffing & Empty Return → Transport to the destination → Unstuffing and Empty Return

### **Practical Tips**

#### **1. Ensure Document Accuracy**

The correctness of the commercial invoice, packing list, etc., directly impacts clearance speed and tax accuracy.

#### **2. Watch Time-Sensitive Milestones**

Especially the free container period—plan pickup and return

early to avoid extra charges.

### **3. Choose Reliable Local Partners**

A forwarder or customs broker familiar with port regulations and customs systems can make the entire process significantly smoother.

We hope this “Bill of Lading Travel Map” helps clear the fog and enables you to manage your European supply chain with greater confidence. If you’d like to explore any specific steps in more detail, feel free to ask anytime!

Note: This article is based on standard operational procedures at the Port of Rotterdam. Specific details may vary depending on shipping lines, freight forwarders, and customs requirements. Always follow the latest operational guidelines.