

# West Sacramento port leaders optimistic after docking first cement ship since 2010

**Darrell Smith, Sacramento Bee, 4-3-15**

A rare sight is docked at the Port of West Sacramento: a Singapore-registered ship that sailed in from China loaded with tens of thousands of metric tons of bulk cement, the first imported cargo of its kind here in five years.

The shipment was long-awaited at an inland port that once banked on cement to boost its sluggish performance only to run into a crippling recession and housing market crash that left cement operations dormant.

Now, port officials and local leaders hope a revived economy and increased demand for building materials in a re-energized Sacramento-area construction market can shake the financially struggling port out of its doldrums. The ship, the Nathan Brandon, has been docked all week in West Sacramento as workers unload 31,031 metric tons of cement, some of which is headed toward the downtown Sacramento arena project.

“It appears the economic upswing is hitting the Sacramento area – the indicators are there,” said Jock O’Connell, Sacramento-based international trade adviser at Beacon Economics. “The local construction industry is starting to move forward – office construction, warehouse construction. They need cement and shipping it is the most efficient, cost-effective way of doing that.”

The port was set up prior to the recession to handle large volumes of cement and construction materials in anticipation of a continued housing and construction boom, O’Connell said.

Before the recession hit, cement firms Cemex and Pan Pacific invested more than \$100 million combined in cement import facilities at the port with capacity to handle as much as 4 million tons annually, according to the port’s business plan. But the recession and regional housing bust forced cement operations to halt in 2010.

Rice remains the lifeblood of the Port of West Sacramento, which handles much of California’s bagged and bulk rice export market. But port revenue had fallen for years, and the facility teetered on bankruptcy. The city of West Sacramento in 2013 handed off port operations to Seattle-based private operator SSA Marine to avoid maintenance and operations costs.

The hope is that the investment in cement operations will finally begin to pay off. The current shipment contains the equivalent of 12,050 truckloads of cement headed for projects that include the downtown Sacramento arena, Interstate 80 work, other freeway improvements, bridge construction and housing, according to Steve Olivos, terminal manager for West Sacramento-based Two Rivers Cement. Olivos said the resulting ripple effect could mean more jobs on the waterfront, at the trucking yard and in the local ready mix industry.

“We’re certainly optimistic,” Frank Patalano of SSA Marine, the firm that operates Port of West Sacramento, and the port’s terminal manager. “What does it mean for the port? Tonnage comes across the dock, that means revenue,” Patalano said. “There’s wharfing, dockage. Obviously, it’s only 31,000 metric tons, but we’ll take this first one.”

Yolo County Supervisor Oscar Villegas, who represents West Sacramento, said this week's docking is "indicative of growth in the region. The port can serve as a good conduit for cement. It's a reminder that the port is there and open for business. We're awaiting the demand for more."