

The container shipment timeline

From booking to empty return: cut-offs, VGM and the 24-hour rules.

Author: Özgür Konakçı · Level: Beginner–Intermediate · Version: 13 October 2026

Online interactive version: <https://ozgurkonakci.com/en/guide/container-shipment-timeline/>

SHORT ANSWER

An FCL export starts with a booking, then continues with collecting the empty container from the depot, stuffing and sealing, export clearance, submitting the VGM and shipping instructions before their cut-offs, delivering the full container to the terminal and loading it on the vessel. Cut-off times vary by carrier and port; if one is missed, the container rolls to the next vessel. For containers bound for the EU and the US, cargo data must be filed at least 24 hours before loading at the port of departure.

Why the timeline matters so much

Ocean shipping runs on fixed vessel schedules. Vessel, terminal and customs dates depend on each other, and a delay in one step can push the whole chain to the next vessel. A missed cut-off often means a week's delay plus extra storage and demurrage.

An FCL export, step by step

The steps below show a typical FCL export by sea. The day counts are **examples**; the real cut-offs are stated in the carrier's booking confirmation.

When?	Step	Who?	Document	Watch out
ETD –14 days	Quotation and booking Container type and number, cargo weight and any dangerous goods or reefer details are given correctly.	Shipper / forwarder	Booking request	Book early in peak season to secure space.
ETD –12 days	Booking confirmation The booking number, vessel and voyage, empty pick-up depot and cut-offs are confirmed.	Carrier / agent	Booking confirmation	The cut-offs are stated here; plan everything around them.

When?	Step	Who?	Document	Watch out
ETD –8 days	Empty pick-up The empty container is collected from the depot and checked for damage and cleanliness.	Road haulier	Equipment interchange receipt (EIR)	For exports the detention clock usually starts here.
ETD –7 days	Stuffing and sealing The cargo is packed following weight distribution and securing rules; the doors are sealed.	Shipper	Packing list, seal number	The seal number must be entered correctly in the shipping instructions.
ETD –6 days	Export clearance The export declaration is filed; an inspection may follow.	Customs broker	Export declaration	The tariff code and description must match the shipping instructions.
ETD –5 days	VGM and shipping instructions The verified gross mass and shipping instructions are sent before their cut-offs.	Shipper / forwarder	VGM, SI	For EU and US-bound cargo, data must be filed at least 24 hours before loading.
ETD –3 days	Gate-in at the terminal The full container is delivered between the stack date and the CY cut-off.	Road haulier	Terminal gate-in record	Miss the CY cut-off and the container rolls to the next vessel.
ETD	Loading and departure The container is loaded and the carrier issues the bill of lading.	Terminal / carrier	Bill of lading (shipped on board)	Do not let originals be issued before approving the draft.
In transit	Transshipment If needed, the container moves between a feeder and a mother vessel at a hub port.	Carrier	—	There is a risk of delays and rollover at the hub.
ETA –3 days	Arrival notice The consignee and notify party are informed of the arrival and local charges.	Carrier / agent	Arrival notice	Have the import documents ready before the vessel arrives.
ETA	Delivery order and import clearance The delivery order is obtained against the original bill (or telex release / sea waybill); the import declaration is filed.	Buyer / customs broker	Delivery order, import declaration	The demurrage clock starts at discharge.
ETA +5 days	Delivery and empty return The container is delivered, unpacked and returned empty to the carrier's depot.	Buyer / road haulier	Empty return EIR	The detention clock stops at empty return.

Cut-offs

The carrier gives several cut-offs for each sailing:

- **Documentation / SI cut-off:** The last moment to send the shipping instructions for the bill of lading. Later amendments may be charged.
- **VGM cut-off:** The last moment to submit the verified gross mass.
- **CY cut-off (container yard):** The last moment to deliver the full container to the terminal.
- **Stack date (opening):** The date the terminal starts accepting full containers for that sailing. A container delivered earlier may be refused or charged.

Cut-offs for dangerous goods and reefer containers are usually earlier.

VGM: the SOLAS rule

Under SOLAS chapter VI/2, the party named as shipper on the bill of lading must submit the **verified gross mass (VGM)** of each container to the carrier before loading. The VGM is obtained by one of two methods:

- **Method 1:** The packed and sealed container is weighed on a calibrated weighbridge.
- **Method 2:** The cargo, packaging, pallets and securing material are weighed individually and added to the container's tare, following a procedure approved by the country concerned.

A container without a VGM is not loaded.

The 24-hour rules

Advance cargo information systems require cargo data to be filed with the destination country before the container is loaded:

- **EU (ICS2):** For container shipments from a non-EU port to the EU, the entry summary declaration data must be filed **at least 24 hours before loading** starts.
- **United States:** A 24-hour rule before loading at the port of departure also applies to container cargo bound for the US.

The carrier and forwarder make these filings, but a missing or wrong description of the goods comes from the shipper. That is why the description and HS code in the shipping instructions must be correct.

Transshipment, feeders and blank sailings

Not every port is called at by large ocean-going vessels (mother vessels). Cargo is often carried first by a smaller **feeder** vessel to a transshipment hub and moved onto the large vessel there. Congestion at the hub can cause the container to be **rolled over** to the next vessel.

When demand drops or vessels run late, carriers may cancel a sailing altogether (a **blank sailing**). Bookings are then moved to other vessels and the timeline has to be rebuilt.

At destination

Before the vessel arrives, the carrier or its agent sends the consignee an **arrival notice**. The consignee pays the freight and local charges, presents the original bill of lading (or relies on a telex release or sea waybill) and receives a **delivery order**. Once import clearance is complete, the container is collected from the terminal, unpacked and returned empty to the depot named by the carrier. The clocks that run at this stage are covered in the **demurrage and detention** topic.

Test yourself

1. The container reached the terminal after the CY cut-off. What happens? *(Answer: It will most likely not be loaded on that vessel and will roll to the next one; extra storage and costs may arise.)*
2. Who must submit the VGM? *(Answer: The party named as shipper on the bill of lading.)*
3. By when must the cargo data for a container from Mersin to Hamburg be filed with the EU? *(Answer: At least 24 hours before loading starts in Mersin.)*

Frequently asked questions

What is a cut-off?

The last date and time the carrier accepts for loading on a given vessel. Separate cut-offs are given for documents (SI), VGM and delivering the full container to the terminal (CY). If one is missed, the container may roll to the next vessel and extra storage or demurrage may arise.

What is VGM and who submits it?

VGM (verified gross mass) is the verified total weight of the container: cargo, packaging, pallets, securing material and the container's tare. Under SOLAS, the shipper named on the bill of lading must submit the VGM to the carrier before loading; a container without a VGM is not loaded.

What is the EU 24-hour rule?

Under the EU's ICS2 system, for container shipments from a non-EU port to the EU, the entry summary declaration data must be filed at least 24 hours before loading starts at the port of departure. A similar 24-hour rule applies to cargo bound for the United States.

SOURCES

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