In the absence of these improvements, congestion at the docks will translate into congestion at the gates which will then spill over on to the local road and rail networks. Intermodal transfer points can be particularly challenging bottlenecks. All of this has a negative impact on port productivity of course, but has broader implications for the supply chain as a whole. The AAPA State of Freight Report suggests that some ports in this country have seen a 25% decrease in productivity due to rising cargo volumes and the resulting congestion. They’re not alone in making this argument. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the US infrastructure a grade of D+ in its 2013 report card.

It’s not surprising that the two AAPA reports were released at the same time. US ports should be touting their successes, particularly after a prolonged period of negative and/or flat growth in the wake of the economic recession. In Southern California, showing signs of recovery is even more important given the black eye the ports took as a result of the very visible impacts of congestion-related delays in moving cargo in 2014. The backlog is still being cleared.

While many people pointed to labor negotiations as the cause of the congestion, it was a much more complicated set of circumstances that caused the problem, circumstances that have not yet been fully resolved. These include equipment shortages exacerbating both the congestion and the resultant delays.

But they also included the impact of larger vessels discharging larger and larger amounts of cargo at peak periods, placing unprecedented demands on the system. If this fact was not highlighted in the AAPA report, it’s perhaps because the audience for the State of Freight is not the ocean carrier but the policy makers (and consumers) who struggle to take on the added burden of paying for infrastructure improvements despite the costs of congestion and the benefits (environmental, economic and otherwise) of an efficient supply chain. So the ports are wise to offer a not so gentle reminder that business is good but could be better. Both messages need to be heard amid all the noise.

Dr. Thomas O’Brien is the Interim Executive Director for the Center for International Trade and Transportation (www.ccpe.csulb.edu/citt) at CSULB and the Associate Director of Long Beach Programs for the METRANS Transportation Center (www.metrans.org). METRANS is a joint partnership of the University of Southern California and California State University, Long Beach.

Landside infrastructure includes access roads, bridges, tunnels and rail corridors. Each of these has suffered as a result of increased traffic placing increased pressure on a network never designed for the amount of cargo now moved through the ports. While levels of congestion vary, one-third of US ports report that $100 million of improvements in their landside connections are needed in the short term.