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The recent Rockpoint report “Coastal Shipping and Modal Freight Choice” gives ports and their users serious food for thought about the implications of larger international ships calling here.

The report, a project funded by the NZ Transport Agency, forecasts major impacts on regional ports as the trend accelerates towards larger vessels calling at just two big hub ports.

Inevitably a coastal feeder system will be needed to service the hub ports attracting the 5500-7000 TEU ships expected within the next decade, probably one North Island and one South Island port, it predicts.

In fact this is the scenario advocated by Fonterra, which argues New Zealand would save \$2-\$3 billion dollars annually from utilising 7000 TEU ships.

So what would the impact of this be on the future of Port Taranaki?

It has a relatively low 21% of total cargo volume in container movements and is alone as the only deepwater port on the west coast.

The report makes no reference to individual ports, but points out that cargo trans-shipments at hub ports would rise by 150% or more, while there would be nil increase for feeder ports.

Before this can occur, however, there has to be port rationalisation at national level, it says. As all ports are regionally controlled and none want to cede an advantage to others, this will be easier said than done.

Nothing less than a co-ordinated industry-wide initiative will be required involving the Government, councils, shipping lines, shippers, transport operators and port owners themselves.

Should this prove too difficult or time-consuming, a big Australian port such as Brisbane or Sydney would readily adopt a de facto hub port role for New Zealand, the report suggests.

Such a scenario would surely put Port Taranaki into the limelight, as it would be the nearest point of entry and exit to Australia for trans-shipped goods.

Whatever the outcome, there is little doubt that significant changes are pending and many regional ports will take on greater cargo feeder roles.

In conjunction with coastal shipping operators, ports will increasingly rely on these to meet the reconfigured demands of international shipping lines.

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