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NORAD to begin exporting truck cabins at Quonset



Journal archive photo / Bill Murphy

Car importer NORAD is the main user of the port at the Quonset Business Park.

NORTH KINGSTOWN -- Automobile importer North Atlantic Distribution plans to start exporting truck cabins from the pier at the Quonset Business Park, a major shift for the company that could boost employment.

Until now, NORAD has concentrated on importing cars, sending away empty, hulking vessels after they unload their cargo.

On Monday, the company plans to load 100 truck cabins, known as cabs, into a ship headed for Emden, Germany, according to Dyana Koelsch, spokeswoman for the Quonset Development Corporation, the agency that runs the state-owned park. The used cabs, which have already begun arriving in Rhode Island, originated in Baltimore, Maryland and were transported on trailers.

"It's definitely a milestone for Quonset," Koelsch said this morning. "It opens that whole activity channel, establishing it as an export port."

NORAD expects to export 300 cabs every month. (The cab is the enclosed space in a truck where the driver sits.) If it reaches that level, the company would likely add employees and hire additional longshoremen at the pier.

NORAD has about 250 employees in North Kingstown. Thirty longshoremen work at the pier unloading more than 100,000 cars from about 120 ships that supply NORAD. The company is the only major user of the port.

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The new exporting will also boost QDC revenue. The agency, a division of the state Economic Development Corporation, charges ships a daily dockage fee to remain at port, and it bills NORAD a wharfage fee for storing vehicles on state-owned land.

The pier recently celebrated another NORAD expansion, when the company received its first delivery of cars by rail, instead of sea.

That was made possible by a \$6-million rail improvement project by the QDC and a \$225-million effort by state and federal governments to upgrade tracks from the border of Quonset to Central Falls. Following those improvements, NORAD agreed to spend more than \$5 million to clear and pave 14 acres by the pier for a private railhead.

"This is a major expansion for us," NORAD president Michael Miranda said in October. "It opens us up to the whole North American market."

NORAD was founded in 1985 with about 75 employees and 40,000 cars imported annually. It now accounts for 95 percent of all shipping at Quonset, and it has made the port the country's 14th busiest for auto imports.

The rail shipments are expected to increase NORAD auto imports by 200,000 cars annually and increase its workforce by 40, Miranda has said.

That growth and other expansions at Quonset won praise from several lawmakers who toured the park in December.

But the QDC is under pressure to speed the port's development. Last month, the state Senate passed legislation that would create a commission to study ways to intensify shipping activity at the Quonset port, The Providence Journal reported.

The bill was sponsored by Sen. Paul E. Moura. It would create a 10-member House and Senate commission that would have a broad mandate to "study economic activity relating to port development."