



ARTICLES SOURCED FROM LEADING TRUCKING NEWS ORGANIZERS
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U.S. Oil Exports Get A Lift

Falling tanker rates are improving the export conditions for U.S. crude, with light sweet grades strengthening relative to other varieties.

Differentials for WTI MEH and WTI Midland versus U.S. futures benchmarks firmed during the week, coinciding with lower freight costs. These grades have outperformed sour crude.

Medium sour Mars Blend, which is similar to sulfur-rich Venezuelan barrels, has remained under pressure amid U.S. marketing of Venezuelan supply.

WTI MEH and WTI Midland reached their strongest levels in approximately two weeks.

Freight costs declined sharply, contributing to increased offshore movement of U.S. crude and providing support to physical crude prices while reducing pressure from domestic inventory builds.

Shipping capacity has increased and tanker rates from the U.S. to Asia and from the U.K. to Asia have declined, supporting the U.S. crude market.

Total U.S. petroleum stockpiles, excluding strategic reserves, rose to their highest level since July 2024, according to Energy Information Administration data released Jan. 7.

The increase was driven primarily by a second consecutive week of nationwide crude oil builds.



Rare Earth Reserves, 'Project Vault'

The Trump administration is advancing a plan to allocate nearly \$12 billion to establish a strategic reserve of rare earth elements.

The White House confirmed on Feb. 2 the launch of Project Vault, which will be funded through a \$10 billion loan from the U.S. Export-Import Bank and approximately \$1.67 billion in private capital. The reserve is intended to supply critical minerals used in the manufacturing of automobiles, electronics, and other goods.

During trade negotiations in 2024 following the implementation of U.S. tariffs, China restricted exports of certain rare earth elements used in jet engines, radar systems, electric vehicles, laptops, and mobile phones.

China accounts for roughly 70% of global rare earth mining and approximately 90% of rare earth processing capacity. These market shares have contributed to U.S. efforts to develop alternative sources of rare earth elements and establish a domestic stockpile comparable to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve.

The Export-Import Bank loan associated with Project Vault will have a 15-year term.

The U.S. government has previously taken equity stakes in rare earth producer MP Materials and provided financial support to Vulcan Elements and USA Rare Earth.

Bloomberg News first reported the establishment of the rare earth elements strategic reserve.

President Donald Trump is scheduled to meet Feb. 2 with General Motors CEO Mary Barra and mining executive Robert Friedland.

Fed Rates Unchanged, Signal Economic Growth

Federal Reserve officials left interest rates unchanged, citing recent economic and labor market data in support of maintaining current policy settings.

The Federal Open Market Committee voted 10-2 on Jan. 28 to keep the federal funds rate in a range of 3.5% to 3.75%. Governors Christopher Waller and Stephen Miran dissented, favoring a quarter-point reduction.

In its post-meeting statement, the committee noted that job gains have remained low and that the unemployment rate has shown signs of stabilization. References to increased downside risks to employment that had appeared in the prior three statements were removed.

Financial markets reacted with declines in the S&P 500 and U.S. Treasuries, while the dollar strengthened.

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell stated after the meeting that expectations for U.S. economic activity had improved relative to the previous meeting and that this could affect labor demand and employment over time.

The Jan. 28 decision followed three consecutive interest rate reductions in late 2025. December rate projections indicated that most officials anticipate an additional rate cut later in 2026, though recent statements from several policymakers pointed to concerns over inflation and labor market stability as reasons for maintaining current rates for now.

The committee upgraded its characterization of economic growth, describing it as solid, compared with earlier statements that cited moderate expansion. References to inflation having increased were removed.

During his press conference, Powell declined to address most questions related to ongoing political and legal matters, including a Department of Justice investigation involving the Federal Reserve.

Earlier in the month, the Department of Justice issued subpoenas to the Fed. Powell publicly responded, stating that the investigation was being used as a form of intimidation.

Powell stated that he has not decided whether to remain on the Board of Governors after his term as chair ends in May and did not indicate when a decision might be made.

Powell confirmed that he attended a recent Supreme Court hearing related to President Donald Trump's attempt to remove Fed Governor Lisa Cook, citing the significance of the case to the Federal Reserve.

Policymakers broadly indicated that current monetary policy is appropriately positioned, allowing time to evaluate incoming inflation and labor market data. This reflects a shift from earlier disagreements over whether policy should prioritize supporting employment or restraining inflation.

Recent economic data showed low hiring alongside low layoffs, with the unemployment rate declining slightly in December. Consumer price data for December indicated softer underlying inflation than expected, though officials noted that residual effects from last year's government shutdown may continue to affect measurements into the spring.

Several policymakers stated that cumulative rate cuts totaling 175 basis points over the past 16 months moved policy closer to a neutral level that neither stimulates nor restrains economic activity, reducing urgency for further easing.

Governor Miran stated that the benchmark rate remains above neutral and supports additional reductions this year. Governor Waller, who has previously raised concerns about labor market fragility, has more recently indicated that immediate rate cuts are not necessary.



ATA Driver Compensation Study

American Trucking Associations launched its 2026 ATA Driver Compensation Study survey on Jan. 13.

The study will provide pay estimates by carrier type, trailer type, and region. It will also examine driver compensation structures, including hourly pay, per-mile pay, annual salary, percentage-of-revenue models, and incentive programs.

Carriers and drivers interested in participating can access the survey online, with a participation deadline of March 30.

ATA stated that the Driver Compensation Study is intended to serve as a benchmarking resource and relies on participation from a broad cross-section of motor carriers to collect detailed information on total compensation packages and industry pay practices.

The most recent ATA Driver Compensation Study reported that truckload drivers earned median annual pay of \$76,420 in 2023, representing a 10% increase compared with the prior study released in 2021. Less-than-truckload linehaul drivers earned median annual pay of \$94,525, while less-than-truckload local drivers earned \$80,680 in 2023.

The 2023 study period coincided with a freight rate recession.

The 2024 ATA study found that 42% of truckload carriers reported increasing driver wages, compared with more than 90% of carriers reporting pay increases in the 2021 study.

According to the American Transportation Research Institute's 2025 annual driver concern survey, compensation ranked as the top concern among professional drivers. Truck parking ranked second, followed by English-language proficiency, broker-related issues, and detention or delay at customer facilities.

ATRI reported that driver wages increased 2.4% during the first nine months of 2025, which was 0.5% below the rate of inflation over the same period.

A study commissioned by FinditParts found that 81% of drivers who were seeking alternative employment cited predictable pay as a primary factor.

During a panel discussion at the ATA Management Conference & Exhibition, A&M Transport CEO Andy Owens stated that freight market conditions limited the ability of carriers to raise driver wages. A&M Transport operates in five Western states, and Owens serves as chairman of ATRI's Research Advisory Committee.

FTR Transportation Intelligence reported during a Jan. 8 webinar that its forecasts project a 3.6% increase in truckload spot rates and a 2.6% increase in contract rates in 2026. The firm characterized these projected increases as roughly in line with inflation and noted that such rate levels would limit margin expansion for carriers.

Carriers and drivers interested in participating should visit www.surveymonkey.com/r/ATA-Driver-Comp-Survey. The deadline for participation is March 30.



Manufacturing Industries Report Growth

U.S. manufacturing activity expanded in January at the fastest pace since 2022, supported by increases in new orders and production.

The Institute for Supply Management's manufacturing index rose to 52.6 from 47.9, according to data released Feb. 2. A reading above 50 indicates expansion.

The ISM report showed a nearly 10-point increase in new orders and a rise in the production index, both reaching their strongest levels in nearly four years. Order backlogs expanded for the first time since 2022, and export orders increased.

Customer inventories declined by the largest amount since mid-2022, contributing to higher demand for factory output.

Following the release, Treasury yields and the dollar increased, while the S&P 500 remained higher.

ISM noted that January activity reflected post-holiday reordering and some purchasing ahead of anticipated tariff-related price changes.

Nine industries reported growth in January, including apparel, fabricated metal products, transportation equipment, and machinery, while eight industries reported contraction.

The factory employment index increased 3.3 points to 48.1, indicating employment continued to decline but at a slower rate.

The supplier deliveries index rose to its highest level since May, signaling longer input delivery times. The prices-paid index increased to 59, a four-month high, indicating continued elevated input costs.

Manufacturers reduced inventories during the month, though at a slower pace than in December.

Truck Parking To Receive \$200M As Shutdown Ends

Legislation approved by Congress and signed by President Donald Trump on Feb. 3 allocates \$200 million for truck parking projects as part of fiscal 2026 funding that ended a partial government shutdown.

The Federal Highway Administration will manage the funds, which are intended to support safety and efficiency improvements along freight and commuter corridors. American Trucking Associations and other industry groups have advocated for increased federal investment in truck parking, citing long-standing infrastructure shortages.

Truck parking availability has ranked among the top industry concerns in research by the American Transportation Research Institute. The Department of Transportation has previously awarded grants for commercial parking projects and plans to continue stakeholder discussions.

The fiscal 2026 transportation provisions also address cargo theft, commercial towing, and development of a national autonomous vehicle regulatory framework.

Transportation Stocks Reach Record High

U.S. transportation stocks closed at a record level on Jan. 6, with the Dow Jones Transportation Average rising 1.7% to 18,033.58, surpassing its previous peak set in November 2024.

Old Dominion Freight Line and Uber Technologies were among the top performers. The index had declined the previous year amid market disruptions from trade tensions and a prolonged government shutdown.

Transportation stocks' record close occurred in the context of broader gains across the U.S. equity market on that date.

Port Activity December, 2025

PORT VOLUMES	TEUs Processed DECEMBER 2025	TEUs Processed DECEMBER 2024	% ↑ ↓ Year-Over-Year
Port of Los Angeles	791,588	921,617	-14.11%
Port of Long Beach	834,119	861,006	-3.12%
NW Seaport Alliance (Seattle/Tacoma)	237,922	304,748	-21.93%
Port Houston	N/A	340,418	N/A
SC Port Authority (Charleston)	194,610	198,018	-1.72%
Port of Oakland	179,580	182,646	-1.68%
Port of Virginia	N/A	284,462	N/A
Georgia Ports Authority	439,630	442,141	-0.57%
Port Authority of NY & NJ reports its volume one month behind other ports	PANYNJ TEUs Processed In NOVEMBER, 2025		
	N/A	718,666	N/A
TOTAL PORT VOLUMES	2,677,449	4,253,722	-37.06%

December, 2025: Tonnage, Trailer Orders, Medium Duty Sales, Class 8 Orders/Sales, Used Trucks, Economy, Manufacturing

TONNAGE: Freight tonnage remained constrained with a slight sequential improvement in December, failing to overcome its generally lower levels, American Trucking Associations reported Jan. 20. The ATA For-Hire Truck Tonnage Index increased 0.4% sequentially to 112.9 from 112.4 the previous month. The results also marked a 0.9% increase from the prior year. Not adjusting for seasonality, the numbers increased 4.3% from the prior month to 111.9. The index also showed that tonnage throughout the year was 0.1% above where it was by the end of 2024.

TRAILER ORDERS: U.S. trailer orders in December improved substantially from the previous month, and also improved over the prior-year level, according to ACT Research. Preliminary net data showed a 5% year-over-year increase to 25,300 units. The results also marked a sequential boost of 112% to close out what has been a fairly mixed year overall. Seasonally adjusted volume at this point in the annual order cycle lowers the tally to about 18,600 units.

MEDIUM DUTY SALES: U.S. medium-duty truck sales in December capped almost a full year of results trailing 2024, according to data from Omdia Automotive. Classes 4-7 retail truck sales for the month decreased 15.5% to 19,082 units from 22,586 a year earlier. Medium-duty sales haven't trended ahead of the prior year since January 2025. The results, however, did jump 46.1% sequentially from 13,063 units reported in November.

CLASS 8 ORDERS: North American Class 8 truck orders soared on a sequential basis in December, a shift that ACT Research attributed more to buyer trepidation over new emissions technologies than enthusiasm with business conditions.

CLASS 8 SALES: Used Class 8 truck sales ended five consecutive months of year-over-year gains by slipping in November. ACT Research reported that sales decreased 1.5% to 20,400 units from 20,700 in the prior-year period. The results also were 17.4% below the 24,700 units reported in October. The average retail sale price decreased 5.2% to \$53,654 from \$56,587 in the prior-year period and 3.1% sequentially from \$55,352. Average mileage decreased 1% to 412,000 from 416,000 a year ago but inched up 0.2% from 411,000 miles the previous month.

USED TRUCKS: U.S. retail sales rose in November by the most since July, fueled by a rebound in auto purchases and resilient holiday shopping. The value of retail purchases, not adjusted for inflation, increased 0.6% after a downwardly revised 0.1% drop in October, Commerce Department data showed.

ECONOMY: Powered by strong consumer spending, the U.S. economy grew at the fastest pace in two years from July through September, the government said Jan. 22 in a slight upgrade of its first estimate. America's gross domestic product — the nation's output of goods and services — rose at a 4.4% annual pace in the third quarter, the Commerce Department reported Jan. 22, up from 3.8% in the April-June quarter and from the 4.3% growth the department initially estimated. The economy hasn't grown faster since third-quarter 2023.

REMINDERS:

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