

Ocean Freight Rates Retreat as Tariff Uncertainty Freezes Import Demand – TFX Update wk. July 13, 2026

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The Lead:

Last week was defined by the transition from temporary, emergency US surcharges toward a permanent, investigation-justified centralized trade architecture. The USTR's launch of public hearings for the [60-nation forced labor tariffs](#) signaled that Washington will lock in a new double-digit baseline duty structure before its [temporary Section 122 fees](#) expire.

This unyielding protectionist environment, spurred by prior legal constraints like the [Court of International Trade's invalidation of universal tariffs](#), has forced close trading partners like Canada and Cambodia to rapidly rewrite their domestic import laws to claim US compliance exemptions. However, as the joint IMF-WTO summit confirmed that global commerce is becoming deeply uneven under these measures, the week closed with clear signs that the high compliance costs of the US metal multiplier are driving a major manufacturing migration away from secondary regional partners, fundamentally squeezing the North American supply chain.

This Week's Ocean, Air & Freight Markets

China-US Ocean Freight Market:

CEA to USWC: Spot rates eased this week, falling from the mid-\$7,000 range to the mid-\$6,000 range. Carriers have reintroduced fixed-rate space and special-rate allocations, bringing pricing down by approximately \$1,000 per container from the early July peak.

Despite the lower pricing, booking volumes remain soft as many importers continue delaying shipments while waiting for greater clarity on US tariff policy.

CEA to USEC: Rates to the East Coast, however, declined more moderately, with carriers offering more competitive pricing and improved space availability to stimulate demand. While pricing remains elevated compared to historical norms, the week-over-week decline reflects weakening booking activity rather than increased capacity constraints.

Importers continue adopting a wait-and-see approach, limiting any meaningful rebound in demand despite lower freight costs.

Freight Right's Lowest Rate indicators are finding that importers can find spot rates as low as \$4,680 from China to US West Coast and \$6,700 from China to US East Coast. Talk to your freight forwarder about options available to you.



China/East Asia → US West Coast(USWC) / US East Coast(USEC)



CEA → USWC



CEA → USEC



[Read more about the state of the ocean freight spot market with Freight Right's TrueFreight Index.](#)

What Happened This Past Week

Tariff uncertainty is delaying imports. Many importers are postponing customs clearance, or delaying shipments altogether, until there is greater certainty about what happens after the current tariff period expires.

Lower prices are not translating into higher volumes. Despite the rate reductions, freight forwarders are not seeing any meaningful increase in booking activity, suggesting importers remain focused on policy risk rather than transportation costs.

Middle East tensions have not yet impacted rates. Although geopolitical risks remain, market participants believe any effect from oil prices or shipping disruptions would likely take several weeks to filter into ocean freight pricing and may be muted given rates are already at elevated levels.

Peak season may have already occurred. Many importers accelerated shipments during May and June to stay ahead of tariff deadlines, effectively pulling forward the traditional late-summer peak season.

Looking Ahead:

The next two weeks are likely to determine the direction of the trans-Pacific market. If tariff uncertainty is resolved with lower or eliminated duties, import demand could quickly rebound, potentially creating an extended peak season through August and September and pushing ocean rates higher again.

However, if tariffs remain in place, or increase, market participants expect booking volumes to weaken further, putting additional downward pressure on freight rates. With many importers already frontloading inventory earlier this year, the industry may ultimately experience another year without a traditional peak season, instead seeing demand shift around trade policy developments rather than seasonal retail cycles.

