

*Key player in the promotion and operation of waterways in France, **Voies Navigables de France** (VNF, French navigable waterway authority), fulfil three missions: the development of river logistics, land use planning around the waterway and water resources management.*

VNF manage a network of 6,700 km of rivers and canals, with a dedicated staff of 4,300 p throughout the country.

Today we share the day-to-day activity and some of the challenges with Thierry Guimbaud, Director General of VNF.



Thierry Guimbaud, how did VNF get through the recent period of covid-19 outbreak and confinement?

To cope with the Covid-19 epidemic, VNF is committed on a daily basis to maintain two of its essential public service missions at the best possible level: enabling the continuity of river transport for supplying France with essential products, and guaranteeing security of the hydraulic network for populations and users in a tense water context.

From the end of January and given the situation in China, we set up a watch. This anticipation device was very useful.

It gradually ramped up to become a light crisis structure and then, at the beginning of March, an executive crisis committee with all the managers of the establishment. This anticipation made it possible to place all "tertiary" agents in a telework situation and to close all the administrative sites from Tuesday, March 17 at 12 noon without the support functions being affected.

It must be said that with 1 head-office, 7 regional divisions and 500 implantations in France, VNF

has resolutely turned over the last three years to modern working tools and dematerialization. We were already trained on videoconferencing and on devices for sharing data and documents. This crisis has taken us a new, decisive step in this direction. I thus have been able to "meet" more than 200 field managers this past month, chat very regularly with staff representatives, and get in contact with all VNF staff.

6 700 km 
of rivers and canals

40 000 hectares 
of public river domain

4 000 
infrastructures

Credit photo @ VNF

We have adapted the service levels over the 2,200 kilometers of our wide-gauge network in order to

prevent contamination and by keeping part of the workforce "in reserve at home" to last.

This adaptation has always been made in dialogue with the profession so that the river freight activity has shown remarkable resilience in this crisis, I will come back to this.

For maintenance staff who work in teams, we have decided to postpone any unnecessary action. Otherwise, specific intervention protocols are carried out and the personnel are obviously equipped with protective equipment (surgical masks, gels, gloves) which VNF ensures renewal with the difficulties that each experienced at the start. We made a direct procurement with Chinese providers, which was not easy, but it succeeded.



Credit photo @ VNF

Each system has been designed in close consultation with staff representatives who have shown, I would like to emphasize, a great sense of responsibility. All employees are very committed to maintaining a quality public service.

The robustness shown by VNF in this crisis allows it to fulfill the strategic missions on which the organization is entrusted. It is also a source of pride for all staff.



Credit photo @ VNF

We know that the air, rail and road sectors have been adversely affected by this crisis. Was river transport affected in the same way?

River transport, like the other modes, was impacted by the crisis and some of its professionals experienced difficulties. Definitely.

"River transport proved to be particularly resilient over the period"

Nevertheless, river transport proved to be particularly resilient during the period, everyone recognizes it. **Certain market segments, such as grain sector for example, have even broken traffic records since the beginning of March.** It is in fact the almost total cessation of the construction industry and the sudden slowdown in world trade which explain the overall decreases in activity which were, in ship movements, from 30 to 40% at the height of the crisis to return more recently to around 15%.

The river transport was also able to draw on a sector that showed commitment and responsiveness and that was part of the very positive momentum when the epidemic occurred. Indeed, **with nearly 7.4 billion t-km, river traffic in 2019 recorded growth of + 10% compared to 2018 in France.**

It is still too early to learn all the lessons from the crisis; we are still in it. Nevertheless, this mode of transport is efficient and shows its capacity to transport large volumes while minimizing environmental impacts. In addition, the robustness of VNF together with the close relationship with our friends from EDF on the Rhine river and CNR on the Rhone river are also part of the answer; **the river can contribute to the construction of a safer and more sober supply chain.**

Where sectors and professions differently impacted? What actions have you taken?

The general developments recorded that I have just mentioned are however heterogeneous according to the geographical areas and sectors.

Shipments of sand and gravel found themselves almost at a standstill, except on the Rhine and the Moselle rivers, the materials being shipped to construction sites in Germany and the Netherlands where the activity of construction and public works was less reduced than in France.

The gradual resumption of major projects over the past 2 weeks suggest a possible return to the activity of aggregates, which expect a decrease in activity in 2020 by 20% compared to 2019, which was an excellent year.

Due to the suspension of production, the transport of chemicals, fertilizers, was also stopped for a time.

The transport of grain for export port silos (Dunkirk, Rouen, Rhone-Saone ports, Fos-Marseille), carried traffic at the start of the crisis period and is still very strong. Barges usually dedicated to the transport of aggregates were able to adapt very quickly to transport cereals, showing on this occasion, the agility and adaptability of the sector.

The container sector, meanwhile, experienced a sharp decline, of the order of -30 to -40%, either due to the temporary cessation of manufacturing in China or because of full logistics warehouses, and not being able to be emptied due to the closure of stores but also due to the overall contraction in demand.

"From the first day of the crisis, without waiting for government measures to support businesses, VNF decided to free tolls for freight boats"

If the river industry shows commitment and responsiveness to meet the needs in the context

of crisis, professionals are of course economically affected by the amputation of a large part of their turnover.

Therefore, from the first day of the crisis, without waiting for government measures to support businesses, VNF decided to free tolls for freight ships. It entered into force on March 13th and will probably end on June 2nd if the return to normal in our activities is confirmed. This is a very significant commitment from our organization for the entire sector.



Credit photo @VNF

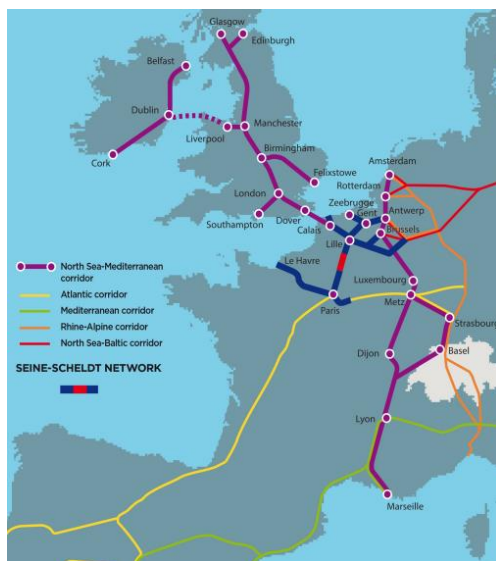
Are you in close contact with other infrastructure managers in France or Europe?

Yes of course. I have a thought for our Rhine river partners under the aegis of the CCNR (the Central commission for the navigation of the Rhine). The Rhine being laid down by an international treaty, we acted in close consultation with them to adapt the hourly amplitude (going from H24 to H16) in order to preserve the health of EDF and VNF staff, particularly affected by the epidemic in this part of our country. **This development is an important event.**

This major European corridor has been open to continuous navigation since the 19th century. That is indicative of the importance of the global crisis and the decisions that had to be taken, and their transient nature as possible. This is the

reason why from the evening of May 10th the facilities are reopened in H24.

I also think of our Walloon and Flemish colleagues with whom we have daily relations. We even act together with them as part of a European Economic Interest Group (EEIG) for the connection of the Seine river to the Scheldt.



European transport corridors

What lessons do you draw for the future, at the level of the inter-branch?

Each link within the logistics chain demonstrates a great responsiveness to adapt to the needs of traffic, notwithstanding the possible human and material constraints.

The time for feedback will come soon. The past two months have been rich in leads to investigate, and to allow us to be collectively more agile and more efficient.

Tourism and river transport will have to reinvent themselves at the end of this sequence. I asked my teams in charge of the development to explore the news strategies for the sector, in close collaboration with all the professionals.

This crisis reinforces a deep conviction: sharing, aligning actors across the value chain are decisive whether we talk about interprofessional,

partnership, cooperation or other things. No matter the terms. Our sector, which does not have the power and renown of rail, road, air, must imperatively continue this path. If the crisis could bring this to a head, it wouldn't be such a small achievement.

Tourism has come to a complete stop. Do you hope a partial or even territorial restart of river tourism? What will be the consequences for this fragile but essential economy for our regions?

If the resilience of river freight has been demonstrated, the situation of river tourism, the second heart of our activity, is much more difficult.

The 2020 touristic season is of course impacted by the crisis and the economic repercussions on the sector, partly made up of very small businesses, are still difficult to measure. Like the induced effects on the economy of our territories: it is estimated that the 11.5 million river tourists generate an annual spin-off of around 1.4 billion euros in our country. This is considerable for all our territories, whether urban or rural.

"If the resilience of river freight has been demonstrated, the situation of river tourism, the second heart of our activity, is much more difficult"

Also, if certain foreign boaters have already informed us that they have given up their navigation projects for this year (foreign boaters represent 36% of boaters on French inland waterways), professional operators are maintaining their projects for the moment, in delaying them, despite the very large number of cancellation requests they had to face. Some have been able to take advantage of recent arrangements to organize reservation postponements, sometimes for the next 2021

season. We are of course in close and regular contact with the profession.



Credit photo @VNF

In addition to the government measures dedicated to supporting businesses, VNF decided, as a first step and from mid-March, that leisure tolls (tourism operators and private boaters), which are essentially flat rate, will be reduced in proportion to the duration of the crisis. I will have the opportunity to submit to the decision of a next VNF Board in June, all the measures that the establishment can take in this matter.

Of course, the effective authorization of tourist navigation and nautical activities on the VNF network will depend on the decisions of the French government, nationally or locally, depending on the evolution of the health crisis and the type of tourism concerned. River tourism has indeed several forms; health constraints and challenges are very different between cruise ships and small family rentals, for example. **We can therefore assume that there will be a differentiated resumption of activity.**

Anyway, VNF, in closed link with the various stakeholders and considering the constraints of the maintenance work that must be carried out, is carrying out preparatory work for the technical reopening of the tourist small-gauge network to

make it operational from the end of May, keeping in mind that the wide-gauge network has not been closed to navigation.

We will be ready when tourist activities are authorized again!

Next week, we will continue this interview with the key issue of water management and major projects that VNF is fostering.

Thanks Thierry Guimbaud!

Interviewed by par Aziz Ouabbi