

# Shippers' Compass

## Kearney's logistics perspectives

Quarterly executive insights for budgeting/forecasting, service expectations, and optimizing in the logistics space

**Q1 2026 outlook**

KEARNEY



# Shippers' Compass highlights: Freight markets remain subdued, hindered by tariff uncertainties, excess capacity, unrecovered demand, and an uncertain economic outlook

## Shipper market

Degree shippers are advantaged over carriers in the market














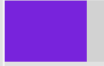













- 100% bar = shipper advantage
- 0% bar = carrier advantage

## Service quality

Lane capacity availability and delivery reliability in the market

- 100% bar = excellent service
- 0% bar = poor service

## Compass snapshot – October 2025

Freight segment <small>US domestic in 2023</small>	US 2024 market size \$B	Carrier concentration	Shipper market	Service quality
Truckload 	387	L		
LTL 	66	M		
Intermodal 	40	M		
Ocean 	121	M		
Air 	101	M		
Rail 	97.3	H		
Parcel 	229.7	H		
Last-mile (bulky) 	10.2	L		
Last-mile (specialty) 	varies by subsegment	L		

## Summary

GDP growth is projected to stay subdued in Q4 2025, with a modest increase anticipated in Q1 2026, supported by fiscal policy measures.

Truckload rates have leveled off, influenced by a slight rise in consumer demand and reductions in capacity.

Ocean freight rates are declining following a drop in container demand after the tariff-related surge during July and August.

Air freight demand remains steady, with growth driven by demand from Africa and Asia Pacific. Softer yields and lower freight rates continue to pressure margins despite a drop in jet fuel prices.

Parcel volumes have fallen due to slower growth in e-commerce and retail demand. Additionally, tariffs and changes in cross-border regulations are expected to impact import-driven B2C volumes in the short term.

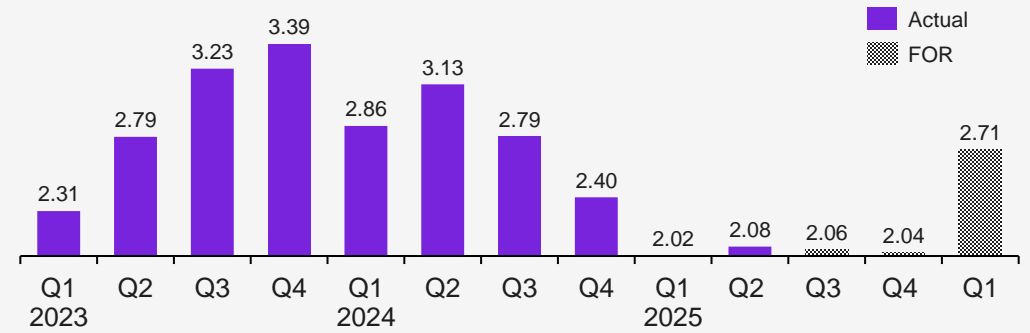
# The US economy faces mounting headwinds in Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 as tariffs and fiscal uncertainty dampen growth and consumer sentiment

GDP growth is anticipated to remain muted in Q4 2025 and rise slightly in Q1 2026, driven by changes in fiscal policy and inventory rebuilding.

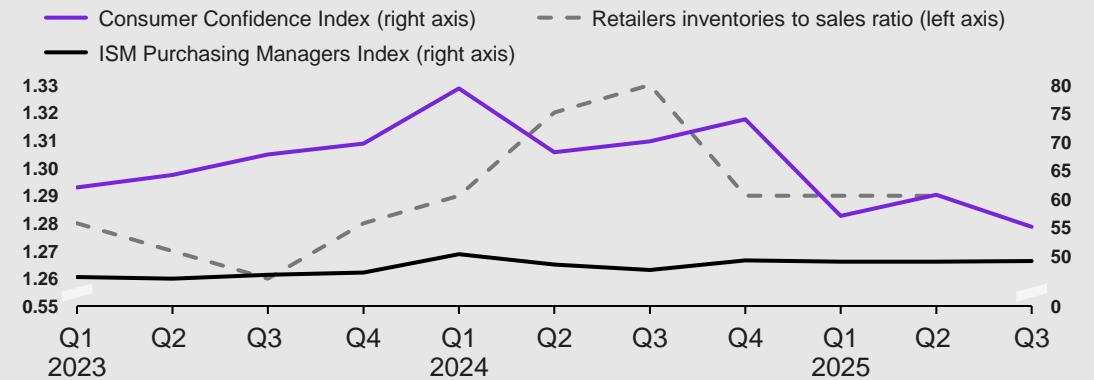
Consumer sentiment continues to lag due to persistent inflationary pressures and labor market weakness.

Fuel costs have declined from 2024 levels and are likely to decline in Q1 2026.

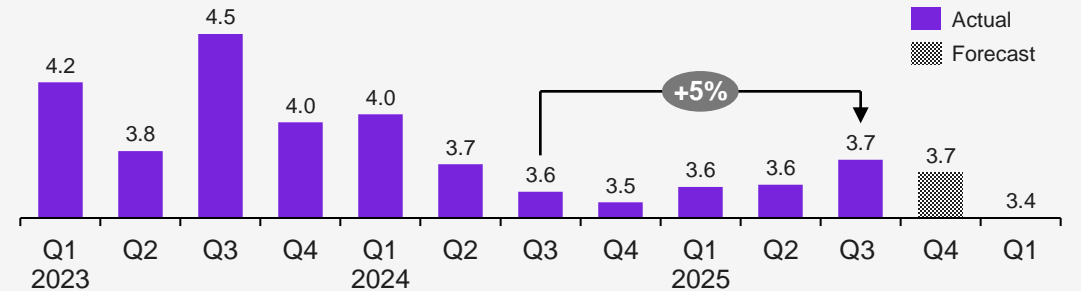
Real GDP (% change YoY)



Manufacturing, consumer, and retail business sentiment indexes



US retail diesel prices (\$/gallon)



## Tariff-related challenges are expected to push inflation upward and cause unemployment to rise in Q1 2026

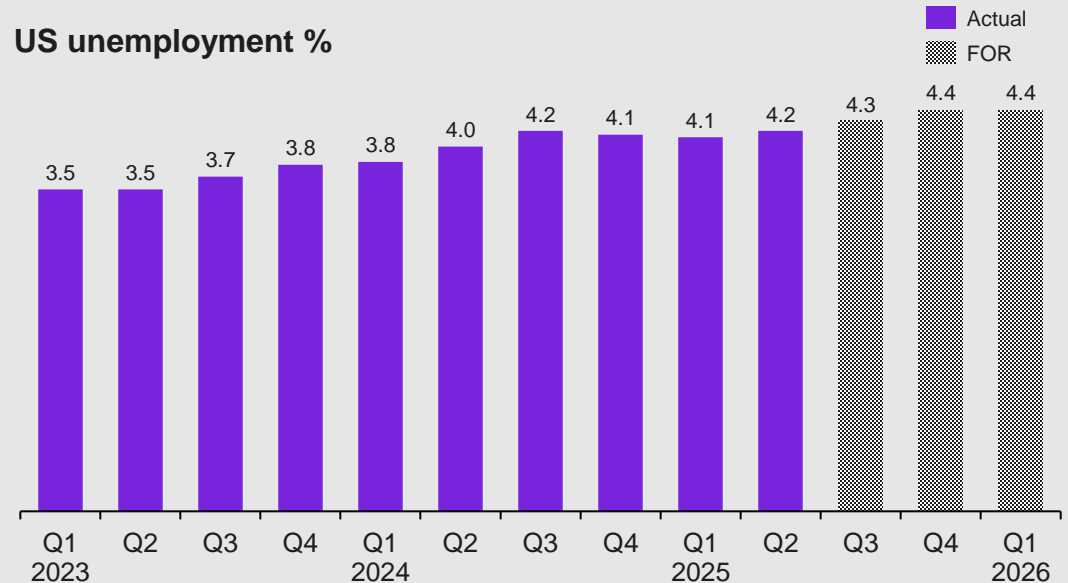
Inflation is expected to rise to 4.1% by Q1 2026, due to increased import prices stemming from higher tariffs.

### US Consumer Price Index YoY growth %



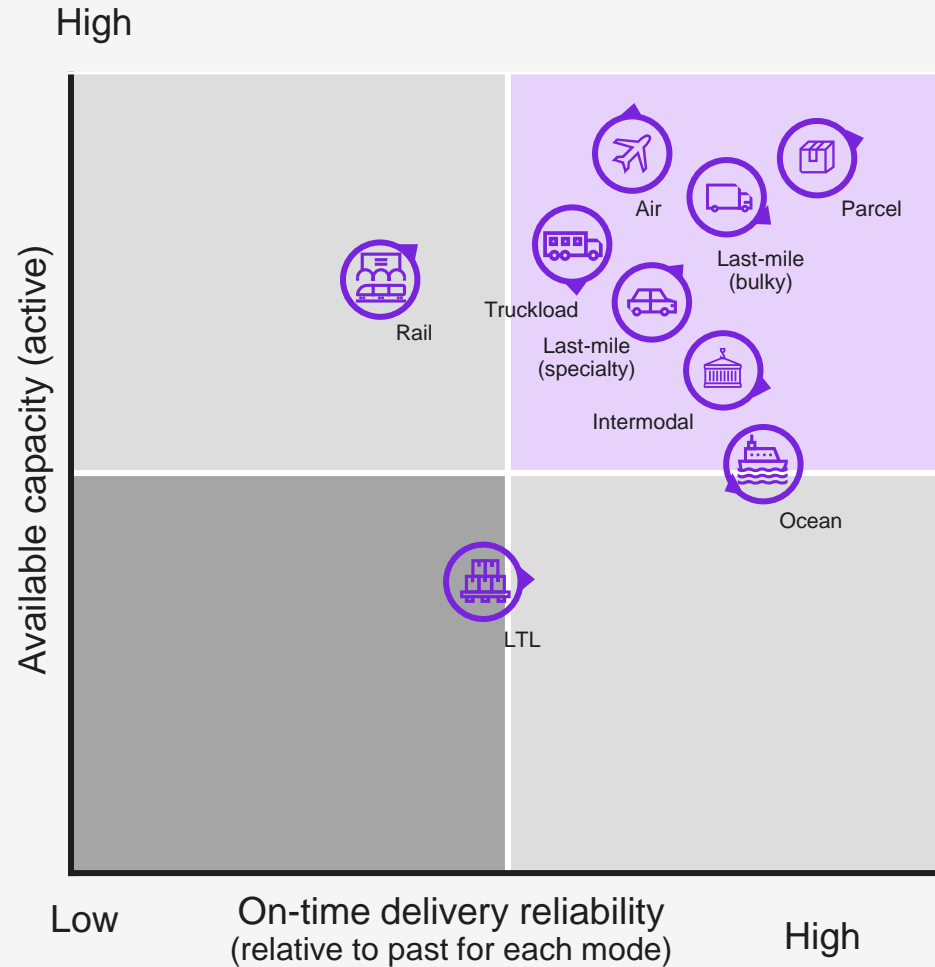
Unemployment is expected to rise to 4.4% by the end of Q1 2026 as economic growth weakens.

### US unemployment %



Freight markets reflect uneven recovery with less-than-truckload showing stability while truckload and ocean remain under pressure

Service quality



- **LTL** benefited from the transition taking place from the truckload and parcel markets.
- **Truckload** capacity remains in surplus as demand remains subdued.
- **Ocean** freight is challenged from evolving tariff policies and carriers' alliances, creating capacity fluctuations across major trade lanes.
- **Air freight** capacity expansion is robust, up 3.7% YoY as of August 2025. CLF edged up by 0.2 percentage points compared to August 2024, indicating stable utilization.
- **Parcel** volumes show consistent decline: UPS volumes are down 26% and FedEx ground volumes are down 1% YTD 2025.

# Truckload

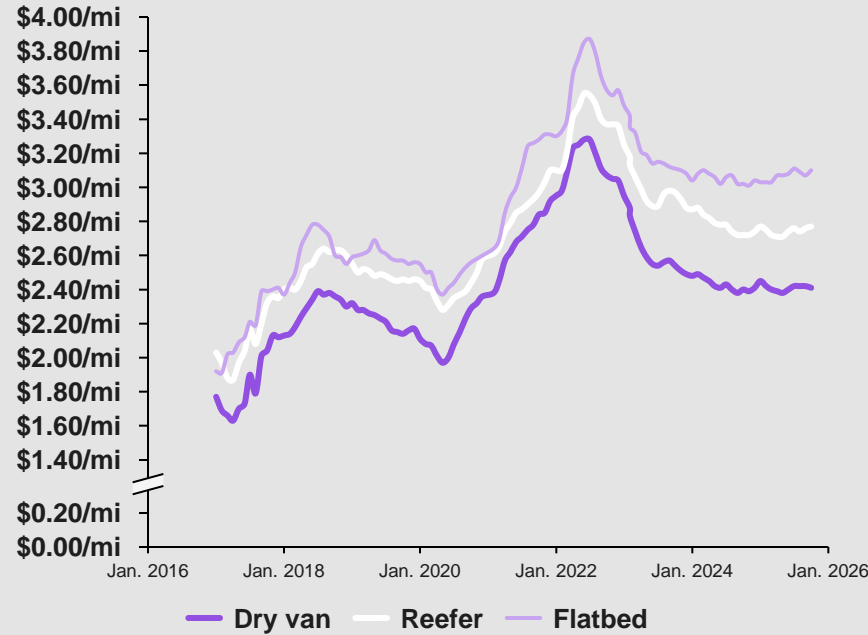
Truckload rates have stayed steady as the market works toward finding its balance in the upcoming quarters

Shipper sentiment (Sep)  
Morgan Stanley

- Now
- Three months from now

## Truckload contract rates<sup>1</sup> (October 2025)

DAT (includes fuel)



	Current \$/mile	vs. Last month	vs. Last year	vs. 2023
Van	2.41	-0.4%	0.4%	-5.1%
Reefer	2.77	0.4%	1.8%	-6.4%
Flatbed	3.10	1.0%	2.6%	-0.3%

<sup>1</sup> As of second week of October 2025  
Source: Kearney analysis

### Demand

- Cass Shipments ticked up **+1.5% m/m (SA)** in September 2025 but remained negative y/y, consistent with weak manufacturing (PMI sub-50) and only incremental goods demand.
- **Inventories-to-sales** eased to **1.37** in **July 2025**, indicating gradual normalization; not enough to spark a broad restock wave.



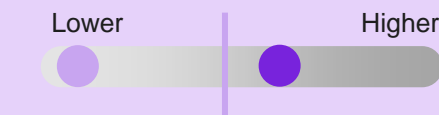
### Capacity

- North American **Class 8 orders** remain subdued: ~13k units in August 2025. Also, carrier population is edging down as FMCSA data shows **revocations outpacing new authority grants** through Q3.
- Fleet right-sizing and carrier attrition are expected to nudge market in balance in Q1 2026.



### Rate trends

- DAT's **national spot rates largely stayed flat or showed slight increases** in mid-quarter before **stabilizing toward the end of September 2025**.
- **Rates are projected to strengthen modestly** during holiday-related micro-peaks in Q4 2025, then ease in Q1 2026.



# Less than truckload

Despite soft demand, LTL rates hit record highs as carriers leverage tight capacity, pricing discipline, and density-driven strategies

## Shipper sentiment (August)

- Now
- Three months from now

## Producer Price Index for LTL services (Aug 2025)

Index Jun 1992=100, not seasonally adjusted



### Market insights

- The Producer Price Index for LTL services continues to climb and reached an all-time high, 4% above its 2022 peak, that **highlights tension between rising costs and soft freight demand** in today's LTL market.
- Shipment weights declined, but carriers maintained profitability through **rate hikes and revenue management** strategies.

<sup>1</sup> National Motor Freight Classification (NMFC)  
<sup>2</sup> 70-85 freight class represents freight with a density of 12-22.5 pounds per cubic foot.  
Source: Kearney analysis

### Demand

- LTL demand remained low through H1, down 4% YoY, but the market remains healthy with strong options for shippers.
- In August, major LTL carriers highlighted continued tonnage declines amid a weak economy, with ArcBest the only outlier, posting growth of 2%.



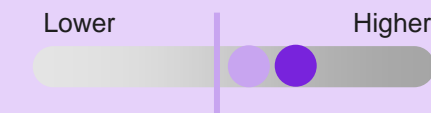
### Capacity

- Capacity tightened after Yellow's exit and carrier consolidation, allowing carriers to maintain pricing.
- NMFC shift to density-based classification will tighten capacity and control pricing in the near term prioritizing dense freight, enforce stricter dimensional compliance, and reject low-density shipments.<sup>1</sup>



### Rate trends

- LTL rates are up ~10% YoY, driven by carriers maintaining pricing discipline rather than chasing volume.
- Higher freight classes see more rate increases, lower (denser) classes face declines, and mid-range (70-85) freight classes show mixed trends, with long-haul shipment trend rising, regional/local freight showing softening trend.<sup>2</sup>



# Truckload

The market is stabilizing with a slight drop in capacity and steady moderate demand, as contract rates maintain a modest edge over spot rates

While seasonal spikes may occur, lasting increases in demand have not been observed

Monthly shipment index (Sep)  
Cass

1.042

Cass Freight Index – shipments

2.5%	-5.4%	-10.4%
vs. Last month (Aug 2025)	vs. Last year (Sep 2024)	vs. 2023 (Sep 2023)

Capacity fluctuates with seasonality but remains at a surplus

Load-to-truck ratio (Sep)

DAT

	Current	vs. Last month	vs. Last year	vs. 2023
Van	6.5	12.4%	87.0%	117.0%
Reefer	11.0	5.7%	119.0%	144.0%
Flatbed	25.9	-26.8%	115.0%	195.0%

Spot rates make limited gains, as contract rates continue to remain higher

Spot rates (Oct)

DAT (\$/mile, excludes fuel)

	Current	vs. Last month	vs. Last year	vs. 2023
Van	2.08	1.5%	3.0%	-0.5%
Reefer	2.48	1.6%	3.8%	0.4%
Flatbed	2.53	1.2%	5.0%	1.6%

- Cass shows a **September m/m bounce** in shipments (+1.5% SA) but **still down y/y** (-5.4%), implying underlying weakness with short bursts (e.g., pre-tariff pull-forward) rather than a broad rebound.
- Commodity/season-specific pockets (produce, harvest) created short-term and regional tightness (especially reefer), but national aggregate demand remains soft.

- Load-to-truck ratios improved in September 2025 driven by reduced truck posts rather than surge in loads.
- Load posts are higher y/y in many lanes, but not enough to offset capacity posts in some cases; market trending toward balance not recovery.
- **Tender rejections have risen from trough levels**, signaling a market **less oversupplied** than a year ago—but not tight yet.

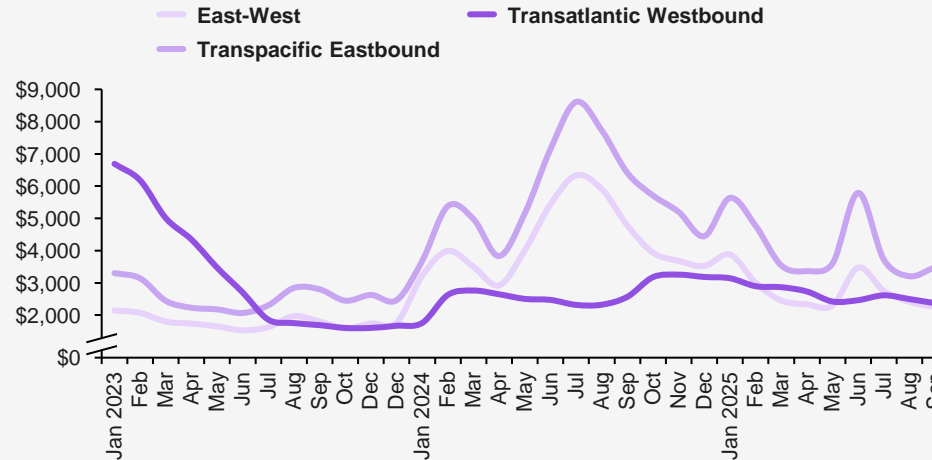
- Spot market shows mixed signals as dry van and reefer markets register modest gains whereas flatbed rates decline marginally in September 2025.
- The market remains shipper-friendly (i.e., shippers still have negotiating power) but carrier pricing power is slowly returning.
- Government is expanding driver enforcement of English proficiency rules for drivers to shippers as well, which is gradually increasing spot rates.

# Ocean

Rates for East-West and Transpacific Eastbound routes have dropped as the spike caused by tariffs subsides

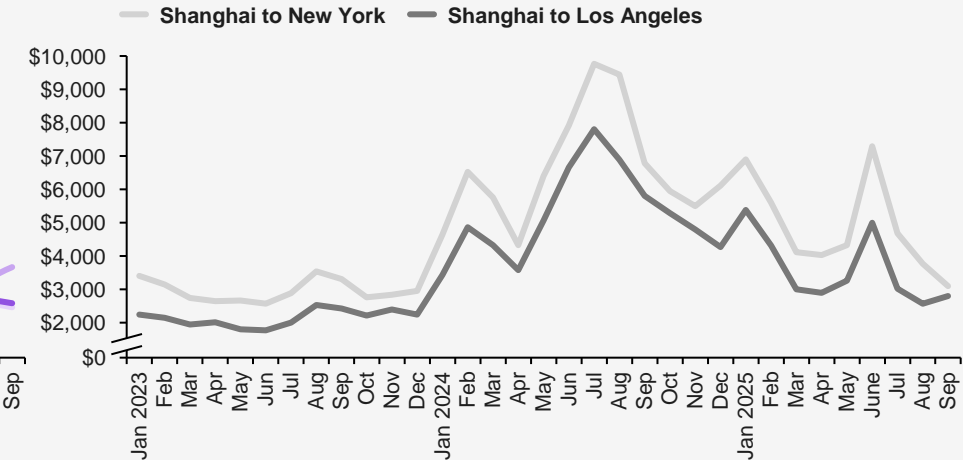
## Ocean spot rates

**Drewry East-West Freight Index (September 2025)**  
US\$/40-ft container



	Current	vs. Last month
East-West	\$2,243	-7.0%
Transpacific Eastbound	\$3,488	9.0%
Transatlantic Westbound	\$2,369	-5.0%

**Container rates for select trade lanes (June 2025)**  
US\$/40-ft container



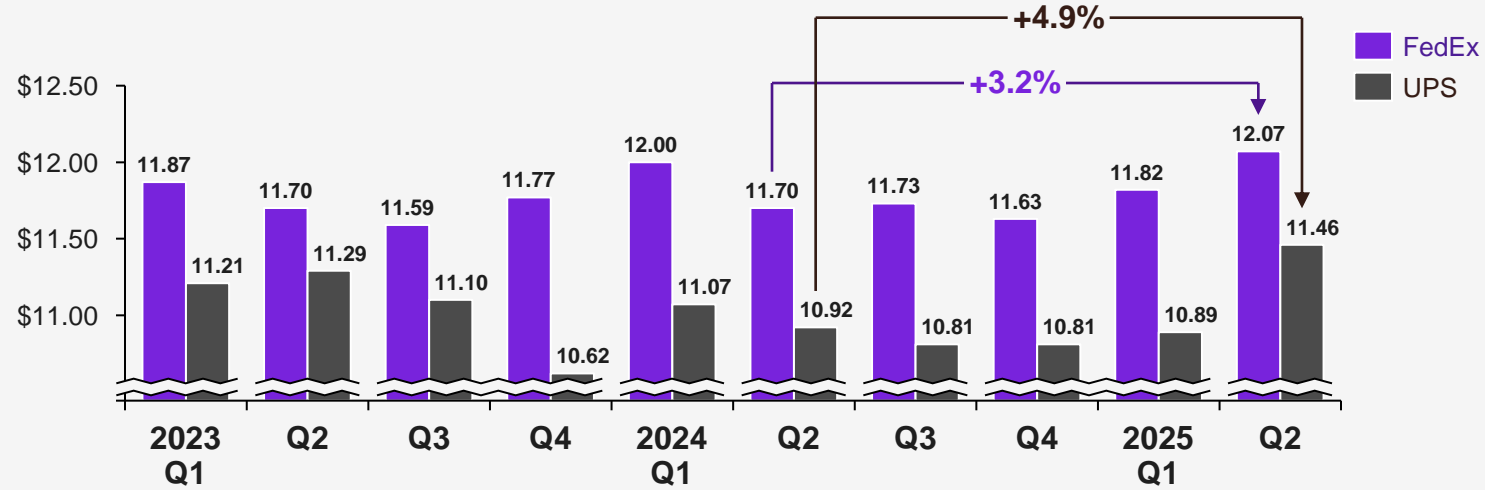
	Current	vs. Last month
Shanghai to New York	\$3,896	3.0%
Shanghai to Los Angeles	\$2,801	9.0%

- Container rates softened on East-West and Transpacific Eastbound routes as demand slowed down. Rates are expected to decline further in Q4 2025 as container demand remains uncertain.
- Carriers undertook measures such as blank sailings and GRIs to manage the decline in spot rates; however, these actions could not soften the impact of fall in demand.
- Transatlantic Westbound rates declined by 5% in September as the tariff-driven surge effect has now passed, leaving a weaker fundamental demand picture for the remainder of the year.
- Rotterdam-to-New York rates declined 6% during the last week of September, indicating rate erosion has begun on the Transatlantic trade lane.

# Parcel

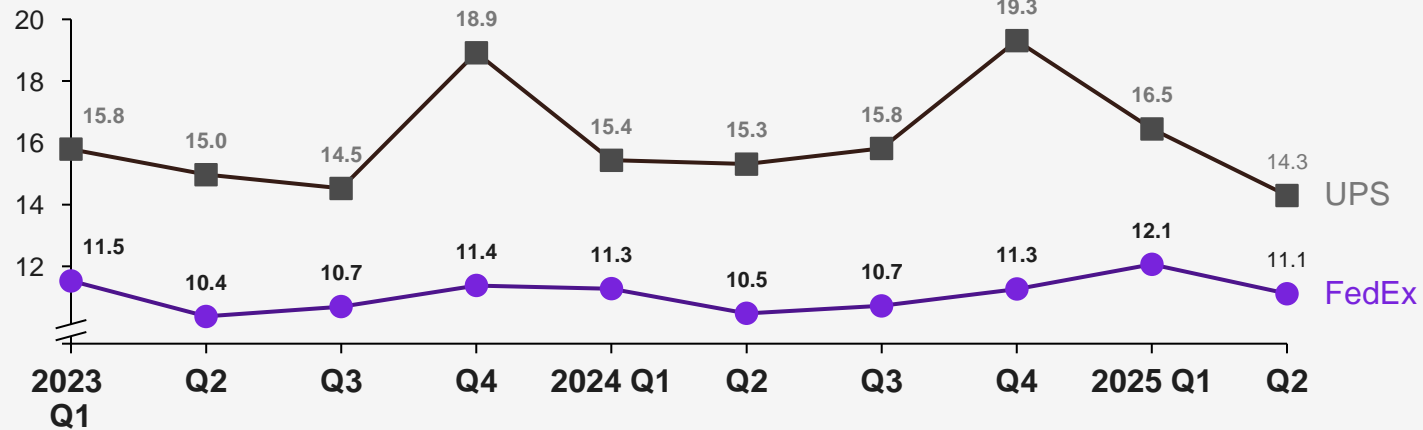
Parcel volume continues to decline into Q2 2025, while revenue per piece rose from UPS & FedEx

Parcel ground – average revenue per package



- Average ground revenue per piece increased 3.2% for FedEx and 4.9% for UPS in Q2 2025 versus Q2 2024.
- Fuel surcharge increased sharply (February–August 2025), as UPS ground surcharges 20.5%, and FedEx implemented synchronized index-based changes.

Parcel ground – average daily package volume (millions)



- UPS ground volumes decreased 6.6% versus Q2 2024, reaching lowest in last two years.
- FedEx ground volumes increased 6.1% versus Q2 2024 and increased 7.1% versus Q2 2023.

# Truckload exhibits initial indications of stabilization, while LTL and intermodal pricing continue to stay strong and high

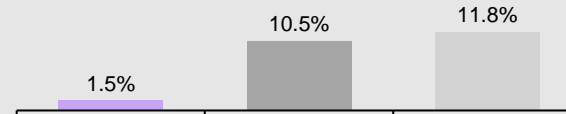
## Truckload

Van contract rates (Sep)  
DAT



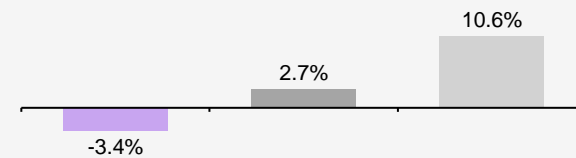
## LTL

Long-distance LTL PPI (Aug)  
US Bureau of Labor Statistics



## Intermodal

Intermodal volume (Sep)  
AAR



## Market

- Contract rates have stabilized and reached a floor.
- Carriers' cost structure remains elevated (fuel, insurance, equipment, driver pay) so downward pressure on contract rates is limited.
- Demand softness means carriers have less leverage; spot rates still below many contract rates in lanes, so shippers retain pricing power.

- LTL carriers have typically implemented GRIs in the range of 3-8% and that helped to sustain rate increase.
- With e-commerce growth, omnichannel retailing, and nearshoring/reshoring trends, many shipments that would have gone TL or parcel are moving into the LTL channel—this shifts mix and supports higher yields for LTL carriers.

- Rail intermodal traffic was mixed in Q3, as domestic volumes rose on long-haul truckload shifts to rail from Southern California, while international volumes fell ~3% y/y on softer import activity.
- Contract intermodal rates are rising modestly, while spot rates dipped after peak season surcharges.
- Festive and seasonal demand surges may temporarily raise spot rates in near term.

## Optimization

- Shippers may leverage routing-guide performance metrics (tender acceptance, route-guide depth) and spot-contract spreads to negotiate.

- Shippers should monitor **contract renewal cycles, GRIs, and fuel/accessorial surcharge regimes** in LTL.

- Prioritize high-demand lanes to improve container turns and maximize asset utilization.
- Secure committed pricing early to avoid peak-season surcharges and prioritize partners that offer schedule flexibility (e.g., early-week moves) to lower costs.

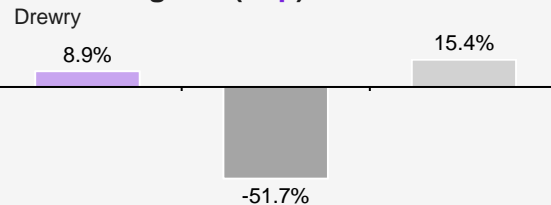
■ vs. Last month  
■ vs. Last year  
■ vs. LLY

Source: Kearney analysis

# Air freight is expanding due to robust demand, while ocean and rail transportation are experiencing challenges with demand

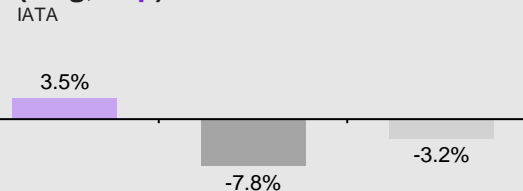
## Ocean

### Container 40' freight rates – Shanghai to Los Angeles (Sep)



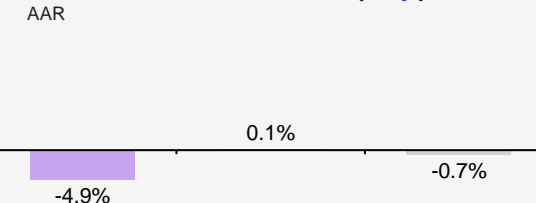
## Air freight

### Air freight average rates – global (\$/kg, Sep)



## Rail

### Railroad carloads – US (Sep)



## Market

- Shipping rates from Shanghai to the US West Coast dropped by 10% during the final week of September 2025.
- The forecast for rates remains subdued, with further decreases anticipated in the Q4 2025 due to weakening demand.
- In response to lower demand linked to the Chinese Golden Week holidays in October, carriers have scheduled substantial capacity reductions in advance.

- Air cargo volumes are up ~4% YoY, marking sixth consecutive month of growth, driven by strong demand from Africa and Asia Pacific.
- Cargo yields continued to soften, with freight rates down 2.0% YoY, edged up 0.5% MoM.
- Jet fuel prices fell 6.4% YoY, marking the 14th consecutive annual decline in August 2025.

- Rail traffic continues to decline, with total carloads down 1.2% YoY in September 2025, driven by coal's first decline in seven months and continued weakness in metallic ores.
- Union Pacific demonstrated strong operational and financial performance, while CSX faced headwinds and CN lowered outlook due to execution issues.

## Optimization

- Conduct mini-bids quarterly to capitalize on market shifts under favorable conditions.
- Maintain multi-carrier strategy across alliances to mitigate disruption and gain negotiation leverage.

- Evaluate whether current demand from Africa and Asia Pacific outbound lanes combined with declining rates presents a good opportunity to go to market.
- Negotiate 3- to 6-month rate holds where pricing is attractive.

- Enhance terminal capacity and port/trucking partnerships to capture intermodal growth.
- Improve operational execution by prioritizing velocity and dwell metrics to drive financial performance.

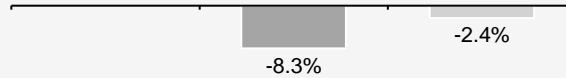
■ vs. Last month  
■ vs. Last year  
■ vs. LLY

# Parcel indexes indicate a moderate year-over-year volume rebound in Q3 2025, driven by carriers prioritizing efficiency improvements and service integration



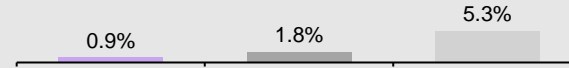
## Parcel

**UPS and FedEx (domestic), most recent reported quarter (Jun/Aug)**  
UPS and FedEx quarterly filings



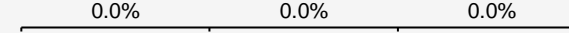
## Last-mile (bulky)

**General freight trucking, local primary PPI – US (Aug)**  
Federal Reserve economic data



## Last-mile (specialty)<sup>1</sup>

**Local messengers and delivery services PPI – US (Aug)**  
Federal Reserve economic data



### Market

- UPS ground volumes down 7.3% vs Q2 2024, driven by strategic reduction of low-margin business (e.g., Amazon).
- FedEx ground revenue per piece up 2% Q3 2025 vs 2024; UPS down 0.8%.
- According to ShipMatrix, domestic parcel volumes for Amazon and FedEx rose 6.1% and 5.0%, while UPS and USPS volumes dropped 5.4% and 6.7% in H1 2025.
- High surcharges and capacity constraints among the major carriers is driving retailers toward regional and private networks.
- RXO achieved 17% YoY last-mile stops growth (i.e., more deliveries, growing market share) with 53% revenue increase in Q2 2025.
- Roadie and similar players are setting new benchmarks with 98%+ on-time rates and <8-hour delivery windows for bulky last-mile service.
- DoorDash orders were up 20% YoY in Q2 2025 with double-digit MAU growth, which reflects sustained consumer adoption of delivery services driven by convenience and expanded offerings beyond food (e.g., retail and grocery).
- DHL Supply Chain North America acquired SDS Rx (September 2025) to expand last-mile delivery capabilities in US healthcare.

### Optimization

- Diversify carrier mix by leveraging private network to manage risk and cost.
- Support end-to-end visibility, returns, and omnichannel fulfillment with adaptable parcel platforms.
- Leverage routing software, dynamic dispatch, and real-time tracking to automate and improve delivery speed and accuracy.
- Invest in technology (TMS integration, unified platform) to drive efficiency in operations.
- Prioritize real-time API integration with shippers to enhance visibility and routing.
- Adopt automation through robots, drones, and micro-fulfillment hubs—reduces costs and enables same-day/next-day delivery.

■ vs. Last month  
■ vs. Last year  
■ vs. 2022

<sup>1</sup> Data for last-mile specialty service has not changed since January 2023. Sources: company financials, Kearney analysis

# Canada

Canada's economic growth is expected to continue declining over the next two quarters, depending on the outcome of tariff negotiations with the US

Actual  
Forecast



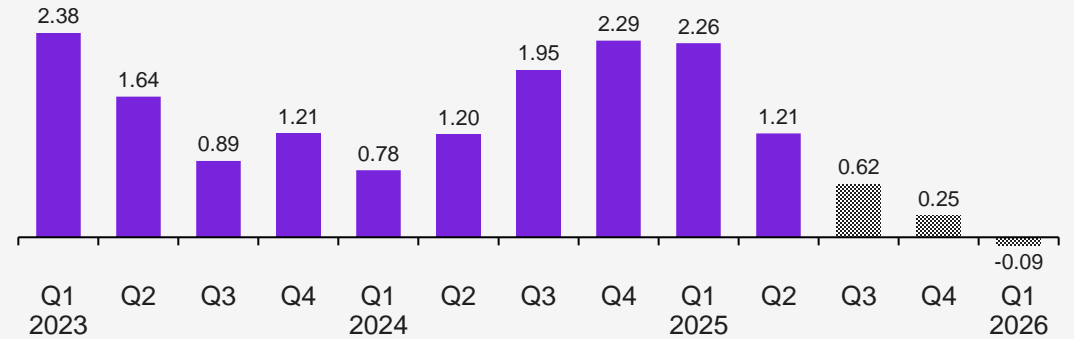
## Macroeconomic trends

Canada's economy is under pressure from tariff shocks, and GDP growth is expected to decline in Q4 2025 and Q1 2026.

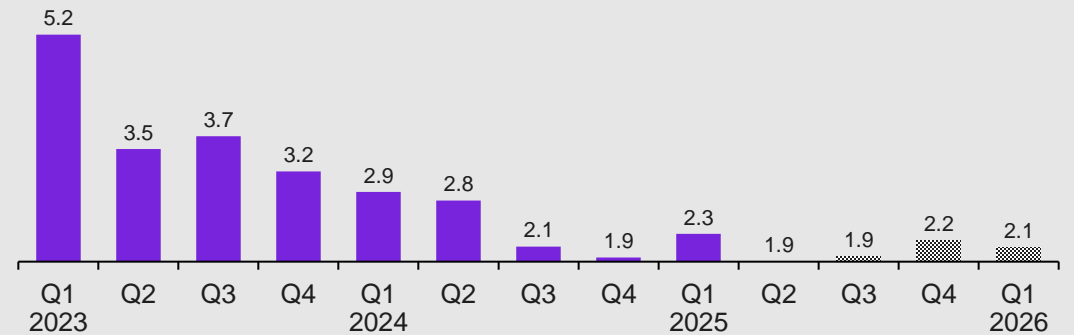
Inflation will remain close to the 2% target over the next two quarters and gradually decline below 2% by the end of 2026.

E-commerce, the largest demand driver, is projecting continued growth driven by smartphone shopping and BNPL (buy now, pay later) schemes.

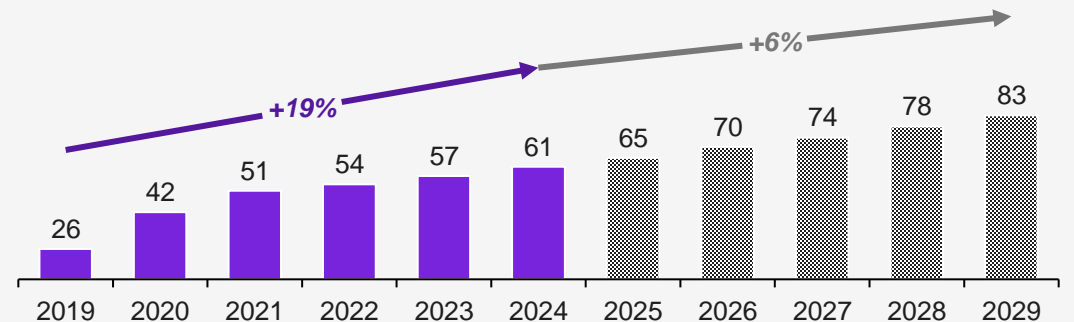
### Real GDP (% change per year)



### Consumer Price Index YoY growth %



### E-commerce market size (USD billions)



# Canada

## Canadian trucking faces weakening rates, cross-border volatility, and margin pressures

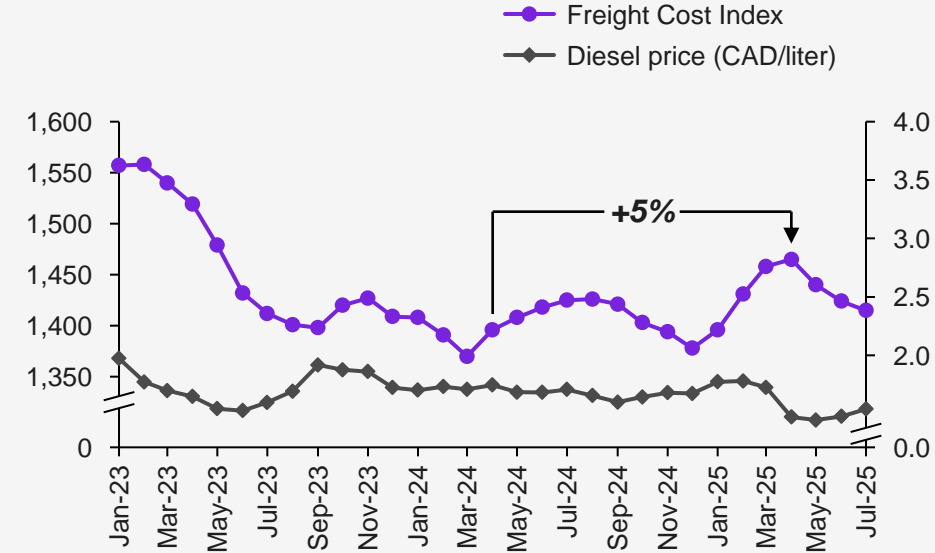


### Market overview – Road

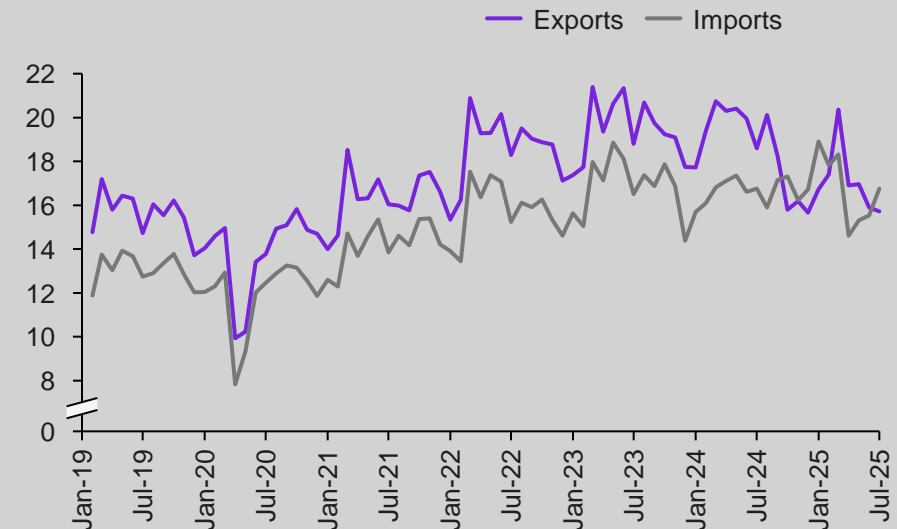
#### Recent developments

- Canadian **trucking rates** have seen a steady decline in the past quarter due to **unrecovered demand** environment and **tightening capacity supply**.
- **Fuel surcharge**, which constitutes 25–30% of trucking base rates, has seen a recent rebound driven by **rising global oil prices** and **seasonal demand pressures**.
- **Cross-border** trucking volumes have been significantly affected by **trade disruptions** and uncertainties, leading to **decreased demand** for goods on both sides of the border.
- **Equipment availability** for outbound cross-border movement remained **stable MoM** but was **down 29% YoY**, indicating **tightening capacity** and potential **pricing power for carriers**.
- Trucking **labor stabilized** in Q2 2025, with a slight decline of 0.2% YoY, but higher than in Q1, as it increased 6,500 jobs compared to Q1 2025.
- Canadian shippers should **diversify carrier mix** across asset-based and brokerage providers to avoid service disruptions and **monitor market signals closely** to anticipate shifts in capacity and pricing.

#### Canada Truck Rates Index



#### CA–US cross-border freight flow via trucking (USD billions)



# Mexico

Mexico GDP growth is anticipated to recover in Q4 2025 and Q1 2026, primarily depending on a recovery in external demand and consumer confidence

Actual  
Forecast



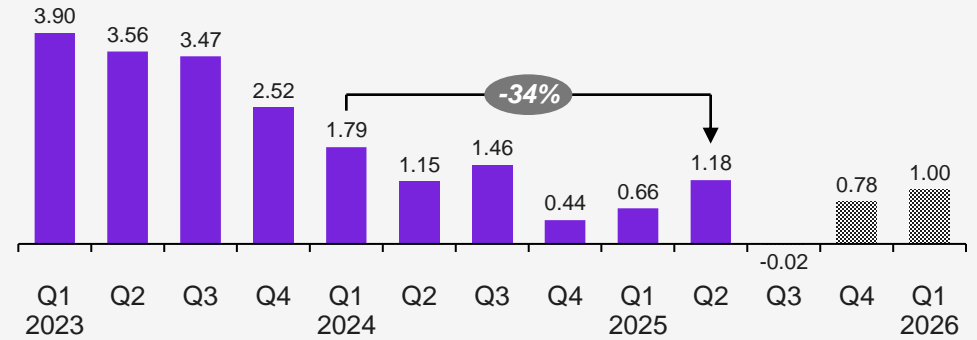
## Macroeconomic trends

The forecast for GDP growth in Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 has been adjusted upward, though it will largely rely on external demand, particularly from the US, as well as stability in domestic demand.

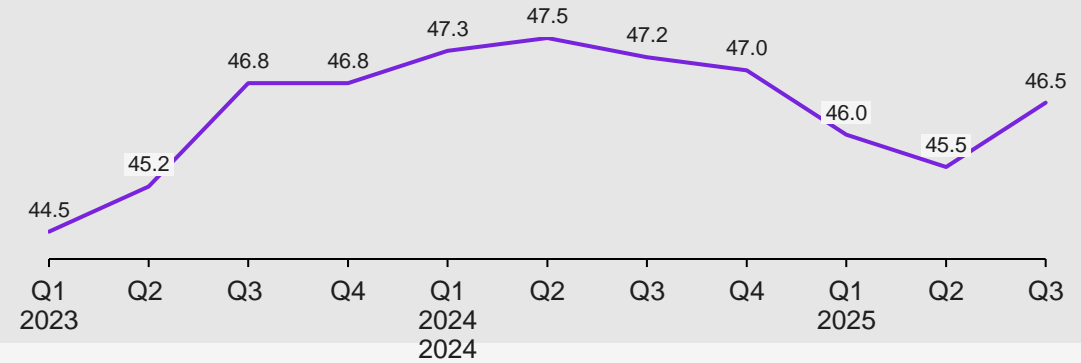
Consumer sentiment has improved somewhat in mid-2025 relative to earlier in the year, but it remains subdued and cautious rather than strongly upbeat.

E-commerce market size continues to grow, though at lower pace than during the pandemic, with this trend expected to continue over the next 5 years.

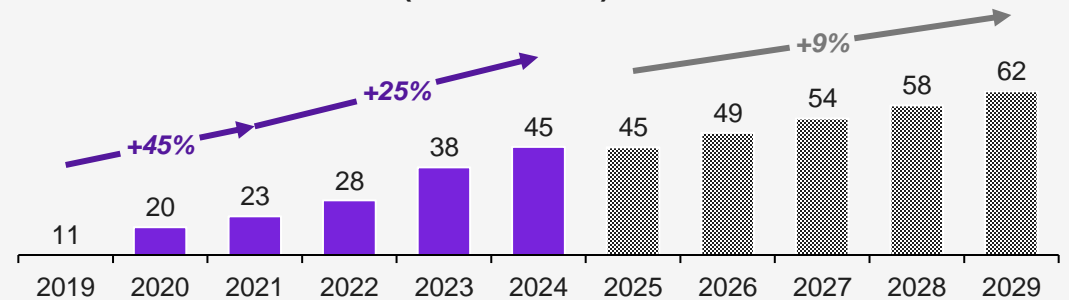
## Real GDP (% change per year)



## Mexico consumer sentiment index



## E-commerce market size (USD billions)



# Mexico

Inflation is projected to remain around 4% during Q4 2025 and Q1 2026, with the unemployment rate expected to increase simultaneously

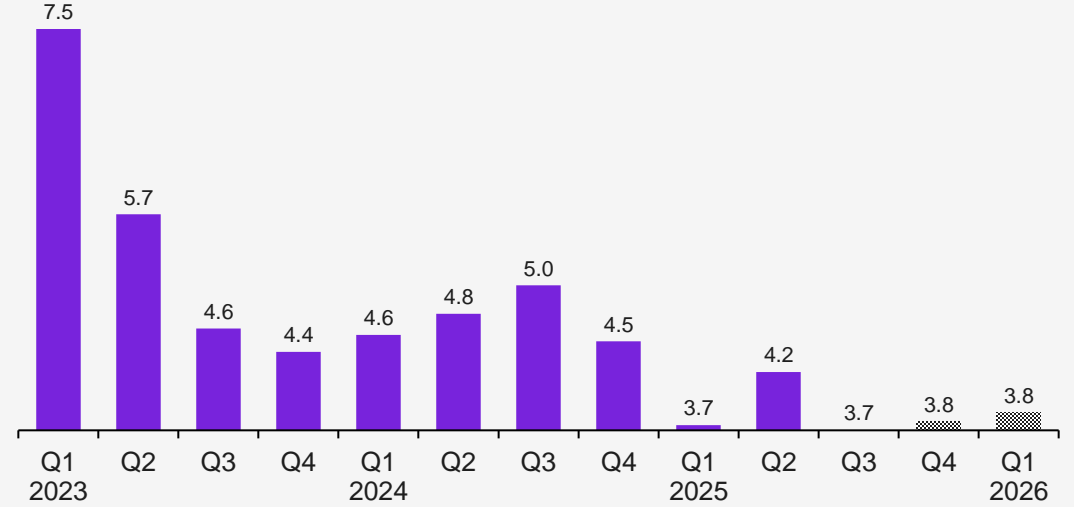
Actual  
Forecast



## Macroeconomic trends

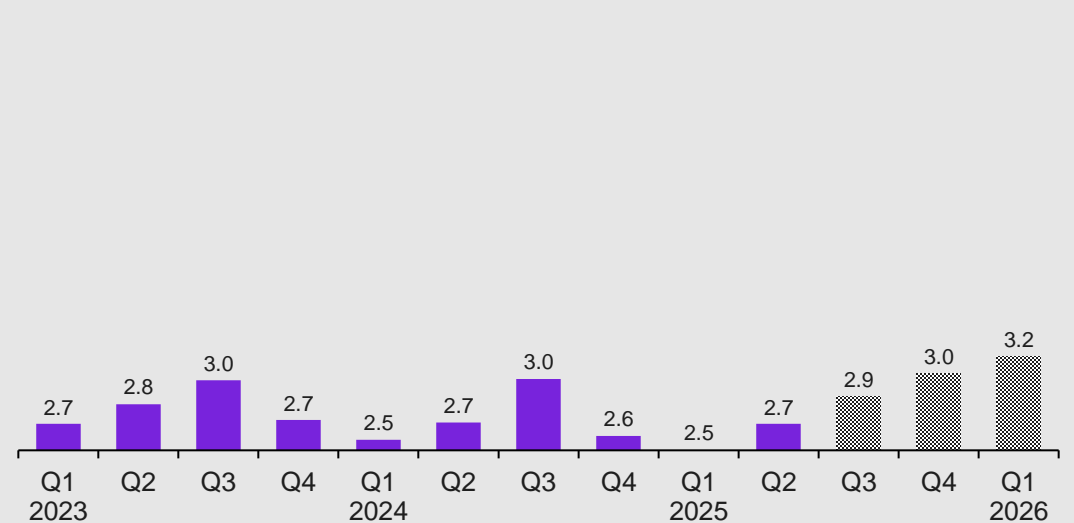
Inflation rates are expected to remain above the central bank's target of 3% through Q1 2026, driven by persistently high food prices, and rising fuel and housing costs.

Mexico Consumer Price Index YoY growth %



Unemployment rates are expected to rise in Q4 2025 and Q1 2026 as economic growth slows down.

Mexico unemployment %



# Mexico

The transportation outlook continues to be impacted by tariff uncertainties, but geographic benefits from nearshoring continue to drive opportunities in the sector

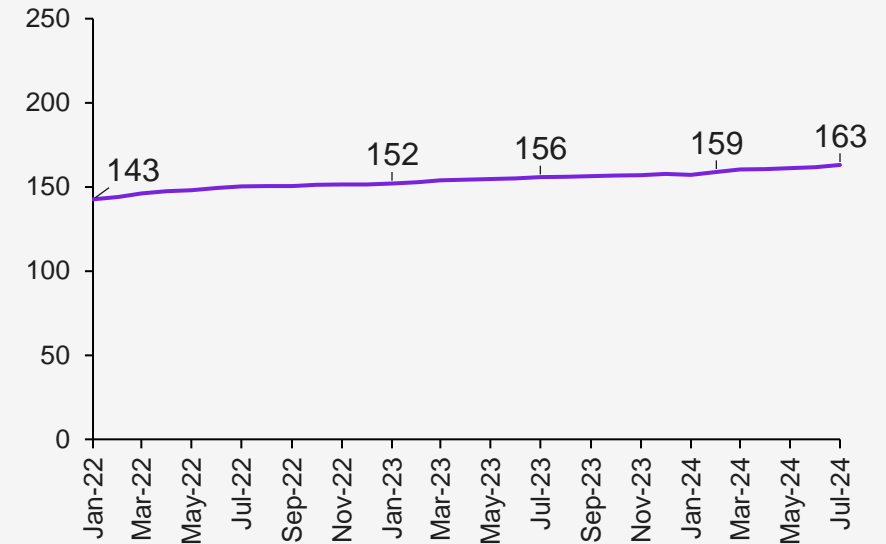


## Market overview – Road

### Recent developments

- **Cross-border freight remained stable in Q3, with seasonal softness in summer**, pushing northbound volumes 5–7% higher YTD vs. 2024, driven by robust demand in automotive and consumer goods.
- **Shippers rerouted cross-border traffic from congested hubs** like Laredo to alternative crossings such as Eagle Pass, where truck volumes surged 51.7% in Q2 2025 and 73.7% YoY in July.
- **Nearshoring to Mexico remains resilient amid global risks**, driven by non-auto manufacturing growth and record foreign direct investment over the past five years, with ~US\$36 billion in nearshoring-related FDI announced by mid-2025.
- **The driver crisis continues with a shortfall of 56,000 drivers**, equivalent to 9% of all available positions, which threatens delivery delays and higher costs in the near term as each idle truck represents roughly US\$5,000 per week loss in sales.
- Major challenges in the market such as **tariff uncertainty, cargo theft, and increased customs enforcement** at major crossings will continue to persist in near future.

### Mexico Consumer Price Index: transport



### US–Mexico cross-border freight flow via trucking (USD billions)



## These are the top 5 areas we think are winners for shippers in this market

### Road, ocean, air sourcing

Take advantage of the still-favorable market context to negotiate better rates via a multi-round RFP process. We are still seeing 5–15%+ savings via collaborative optimization sourcing across clients, with the process now enhanced by AI tools.

### Agentic AI

Agentic AI helps teams improve visibility, optimize sourcing preparation, identify costly issues early, and negotiate more dynamically, and it works with you to raise the value of doing logistics sourcing and operations.

### Operational attractiveness

Carriers can reduce driver shortages by offering flexible training contracts, improving work conditions, and adopting driver-friendly tech. Shippers can help by minimizing loading delays, enhancing driver amenities, and streamlining scheduling.

### Capacity management

Shippers should diversify carrier mix, adopt technology, and use flexible contracts to reduce service disruptions, control cost (in up or down markets), and optimize capacity utilization.

### Tech-driven cost optimization

Shippers shall integrate artificial intelligence, IoT and automation for smarter routing, real-time visibility, and streamlined operations.



# Agentic AI for logistics procurement and freight spend

## What Pando does

- AI agents automate transactional logistics procurement, freight audit and pay, and spend management so the team resources can focus on higher value-added activity.
- Connects seamlessly with ERP, TMS, WMS, market sources, and carrier systems to unify data.
- Replaces manual, spreadsheet-driven tasks with autonomous workflows.

## Value created (30 days to go live)

- 3–10% freight cost reduction via better visibility and sourcing, optimized carrier allocation, and rate intelligence.
- Up to 100% automation of freight sourcing, invoicing, and audit with zero human touch.
- 90%+ cycle-time reduction in procurement and post-audit processes.
- Frees up teams, replaces SaaS tools for E2E visibility and trust in cost allocation, audit coverage, financial accuracy.

# In this shippers' market, Kearney can help you source, optimize, and hit ESG targets with our proven approaches

## Collaborative optimization

Use advanced analytical tools for RFP process to model and optimize a combination of external offers and internal business requirements.

**5–20%**  
**savings**  
third-party logistics spend

## 3PL sourcing/outsourcing/rationalization

Outsourcing specific logistics services to qualified partners under contract (for example, 3PL managed transportation, outsourcing warehousing function) enables reduction in overhead and flexible capacity.

**3–6 Mo.**  
**time to value**

## Freight procurement organization

Establish the right organization, team, and skill sets to sustain freight-sourcing benefits.

**Sustainment**

# We can help you take an end-to-end mindset, deploy cost-takeout levers, and hit CO<sub>2</sub> targets

Select levers; non-exhaustive

## Network and footprint optimization

Right-size distribution network to minimize total network cost while guaranteeing customer service levels.

**4–15%**  
**savings**  
total supply chain spend

## Mode and delivery optimization

Optimize delivery frequency by customer based on level of volume to increase truck utilization and minimize total mileage.

**7–16%**  
**savings**  
total transportation spend

Match the right lanes with the right mode based on cost of transportation, utilization, lead time, carrier requirements, and so on. Common mode/fleet conversions include LTL to FTL, FTL to intermodal, rail to short sea, one-way FTL to dedicated, dedicated to private fleet.

**6–12 Mo.**  
**time to value**

## Logistics operating model optimization

Diagnostic and improvements across transportation department activities: organization, technology, load-planning, freight auditing, load execution, carrier management, BI.

**Sustainment**

# Thank you

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