

Interview with Mauro Pacella, new President ASSOFERR: renewing the central role of the association

Interview by Ferpress for the [Mobility Magazine Nr. 485](#)

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ASSOFERR, the Association of Rail and Intermodal Operators, is 25 years old. It was in 2000 when two presidents of rail associations - Giovanni Gazzola, president of Assocarri, and Franco De Girolamo, president of Sunfer - decided to merge into a single entity to represent with greater incisiveness the needs of railfreight wagon keepers and rail operators. Promoting a unified, integrated and systemic vision of logistics, freight transport and intermodality, this has since become one of the association's main strengths.

As of June 24, 2025, Mauro Pacella is the new president of ASSOFERR. Active in the association practically since its inception and holding the role of General Secretary and gradually other positions, Pacella picks up the legacy of his nine predecessors, who each left a clear mark. An Industrial Engineer (Aerospace and Railway) and Technical Manager, Pacella has always worked on the design and maintenance of freight railway wagons, as well as on all issues inherent to rail cargo but also air cargo, with a special focus on safety; he is also an instructor, consultant to several companies and participant in several working groups, nationally and in Europe. In this interview, Mauro Pacella outlines ASSOFERR's roles and objectives in the international and Italian context, and projects the association into more incisive action with the support of all players in the industry, looking in particular at an important initiative such as the creation of "Binario Italia" as a means of getting more attention from institutions.



ASSOFERR is a long-standing member of UIP, the association representing freight wagon keepers at the European level and covering around 50% of rail freight transport in Europe. UIP's role is increasingly active, which was also confirmed by the UIP Keepers' Summit held last year in Venice.

The ASSOFERR - UIP relation?

ASSOFERR is a member in Europe of UIP, an association founded in 1950. Today UIP represents more than 250 Keepers and workshops scattered throughout Europe. The total wagons represented are more than 250,000 and perform more than 50 percent of the rail freight ton/km in Europe. UIP is celebrating the important anniversary of 75 years in 2025.

The current circulating fleet constitutes a total investment pool of 12 billion Euros and about 400 to 500 million Euros are invested annually in new wagons. The principles on which UIP's political action at the European level is based and which ASSOFERR shares are:

- raise awareness among policy and decision makers of the role of wagon keepers in the rail system and logistics supply chain
- develop an economically viable long-term vision for rail freight wagon investments.
- ensure a level playing field among modes and fair intramodal competition (freight vs. passenger)

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- develop a common culture for efficient exchanges of relevant information and data among actors in the rail system and supply chain, including freight customers
- promote regulatory stability and consistency at the EU level to ensure interoperability and safety of wagons while respecting the life cycle of goods (25-35 years).

And in Italy ?

In Italy, ASSOFERR is a member of Confrasperto, with the conviction that support for intermodality is one of the founding and cohesive elements of a political and economic vision for more efficient and safer door-to-door transport by integrating the peculiarities of the various modes. ASSOFERR in its recent statutory reform wanted to emphasize its history and thus emphasize and bring back the rail wagon to the center of its technical and political action. Despite this emphasis, this applies also to all other components of rail transport, because clearly the wagon cannot exist in isolation. It must seamlessly integrate with all the elements that collectively make up the freight train as a product.

How does this strategy translate into practice?

How do we plan to realize this laser focus on the rail freight wagon as an asset?

A rail freight wagon goes through different phases in its life-cycle : investment (with design and construction), operation and maintenance. This in ASSOFERR has been organizationally declined into three categories:

- Wagon Holders and ECMs: those who invest in, design and build wagons while also arranging their use.
- Maintenance Operators: who under the guidance of the above take care of the wagons' safety, reliability and efficiency
- Rail operators: all those who actually use the rail freight wagons and thus are interested in its safe and efficient utilization. In this sense, no one is excluded: MTOs, Terminal Operators, Railway Undertakings, Industries, etc.

At the membership organization level, each category has a Vice President who will assist the President in the Executive Committee. In the order of the three categories presented above these are Barbara Recli, Angelo Chigioni and Vittorio Gatti.

What, therefore, are the goals that the "renewed" ASSOFERR sets for itself?

We can summarize them like this: the centrality of the rail freight wagon cannot be an abstract concept; rather, it is the sum of practical and consequent actions. This means designing and building increasingly modern and efficient vehicles, which, through continuous fleet renewal, allow us to satisfy clients by creating ever longer and heavier trains (compatible with infrastructural limits that are, however, being progressively overcome year after year. 750 meters and/or 2,500 tons must be the standard requirement). It also means overcoming the perception of the rail freight wagon as a mere "piece of iron" and as the "poor link in the railway chain."

With the progressive digitization that will see ultimate fulfillment in the future with DAC (Digital Automatic Coupling), the wagon will increasingly be a "living" asset in direct communication with those who use it. It will "talk" with the locomotive, infrastructure, terminals, customers, etc. To achieve all this requires increasingly in-depth and coordinated skills and knowledge. ASSOFERR with its legal and technical committees will aim precisely to handle these fundamental aspects.

Standardization and Training are other necessary and functional actions to achieve the objectives. All this we will accomplish in Italy with Confrasperto and especially in Europe with UIP and other foreign partner associations such as VPI that have developed technical know-how over the years. In 20/25 years, which may seem like a lot but given the non-simplicity of the system instead it is not, we have gone from national regulations, means and infrastructure to European norms and interoperable mobile and fixed systems. This process is not yet finished, the complexity and some critical issues have actually increased. On this we have to work hard together with all the other actors in the system.



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ASSOFERR also counts on contributing a lot to the issue of safety through a lot of training and experience sharing activities, which in the maintenance sector is crucial. And we will do this by looking at sustainability. Given that safety is not an area for cuts, building critical mass and sharing tools and actions are precisely the way forward. The European Green Deal also needs to be reviewed and corrected. As it's currently structured, it's not sustainable, and therefore, not implementing it or implementing it poorly, thereby killing many primary productive activities, doesn't make much sense. Especially if it's not being implemented in other parts of the world, thus distorting global markets.

What are the conclusions concerning the actions of your ASSOFERR presidency?

We don't imagine we'll influence major global systems and economic policies, but we are presumably certain that the overall role of **rail freight can help bring "true" industry back to Italy and Europe**. We cannot live solely on distribution and consumption. We need to produce, and do so with significant added-value margins. The crisis we are experiencing in Europe is significant across many sectors, automotive being just one. The role of railway can be fundamental. This isn't presumption, but an awareness of a role we can fulfill. Today, European Wagon Keepers can provide users with vast fleets of **modern, efficient, safe, and interoperable wagons**.

On all of this, as ASSOFERR, we hope to build critical mass with our colleagues in the sector, because while it's certainly true that everyone pursues their legitimate interests—and we do so with wagons—what we ultimately need to see running outside the window, or entering/leaving a port or terminal, are **"trains."** We hope that the recent industry initiative, **"Binario Italia,"** will lead to the necessary attention and actions from institutions.

An Interview by Antonio D'Angelo

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