

# Press-Telegram

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Workers move a fuel additive from a rail car tank at the Ventura Transfer Company's rail car transfer facility along the Alameda Corridor in Carson to a truck before taking it to Fresno.

## Not your average transport job

Ventura Transfer Company drivers move things the general public can't even pronounce

**By Kristopher Hanson**  
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — The trucking and transportation industry isn't necessarily glamorous or sexy, but it's critical to our economy and way of life.

In the greater Long Beach area, shipping, warehousing and transloading is big business, with trucks, trains and cargo ships moving millions of products to consumers and businesses across the country.

Within this sprawling industry, there's a specially trained and licensed niche responsible for handling some of the most unusual and dangerous cargo around.

Long Beach-based Ventura Transfer Company is one of these businesses.

In a nutshell, VTC transports the chemicals, additives and other agents that manufacturers, agriculture and the food and oil industries use by the truckload.

### Ventura Transfer Company

**Location:** Long Beach

**Employees:** 130

**Founded:** 1869

**Executives:** Brian Oken, president and chief executive officer; Owned by Clifford family Business: Transloading, transporting and warehousing of chemicals, petroleum products, plastics and other liquid and dry bulk products.

**Weight of goods** handled by Ventura in 2005 (in pounds): 306,623,886 – 115,532,744 liquid pounds/ 191,091,142 dry pounds



**Brian Oken**, President and Chief Executive Officer of Ventura Transfer Company in Long Beach, explains methods and type of containers his company uses to transfer a variety of materials around the world.

Chemicals like glycerin, a fairly benign liquid used in almost every commercial shampoo, soap and lotion available today but also utilized in the manufacture of explosives.

Obscure compounds like Methylene Diphenyl Diisocyanate (MDI), used to make polyurethane, which if exposed to even a drop of water (a part per million) is completely ruined.

Latexes used for paint and glue, chemicals used for gasoline refinement and other petroleum products.

“We handle a lot of the stuff you read in the ingredient list on the label, but you don’t know what it is,” said Ventura President and CEO Brian Oken. “The ingredients after water and tomato paste with really long names.”

And judging by Ventura’s workload, there’s plenty of this cargo to move around.

Last year, the company handled more than 300 million pounds of liquid and dry bulk cargo — about 40 percent of it considered hazardous to humans.

This calendar year, the company expects to exceed that tonnage by 20 percent.

With such potentially volatile cargo in tow, the company knows safety must remain priority No. 1. Drivers must pass federal background checks and obtain state and federal permits to carry their loads.

Since the events of 9/11, the government has established even stricter handling and transport measures.

“Our drivers have the same background checks that they use for military secret clearances,” said

Charlie Ring, VTC’s business development manager.

“We don’t have the option of making mistakes,” Oken said. “Our customers and the public depend on us.”

Ventura specializes in transporting things like Maleic Anhydride (MA) — a common chemical used in everything from food to agriculture that if touched directly or breathed can cause serious health problems.

Much of its cargo is difficult to pronounce and understood only by chemists and the heavily trained Ventura staff. Drivers employed by VTC undergo 25 to 50 hours of training annually to understand new laws, Oken said.

In addition to their commercial license, the drivers must obtain a special hazmat endorsement. That license is renewed every three years.

The company’s longtime headquarters in west Long Beach is nestled between a giant British Petroleum oil refinery and the Alameda Corridor — one of the West Coast’s busiest railyards.

It’s this railyard that provides Ventura with a large chunk of its business.

Every day, the company loads and unloads about 40,000 pounds of mostly liquid chemical products out of or into railcars — many specially designed to handle hazardous materials.

### Some items handled by Ventura Transfer Co. and their common uses:

**Tallow/fatty acids(animal fat):** Cosmetics, cooking

**Polycarbonate:** Thermoplastic used to make compact discs and DVDs, bullet-proof glass, eyeglass lenses

**Glycerin:** Chemical used in soap, shampoo, lubricants, cough syrup Polyethylene pellets: Tiny plastic beads used to create milk jugs, water bottles, shopping bags

**Liquid latex:** Household paint, rubber protectant, fetish clothing

**Kerosene:** Used as rocket fuel mix for satellites launched from Sea Launch platform

**Maleic Anhydride:** Chemical used as a preservative for oils and fats, additive to agricultural chemicals and for production of pharmaceuticals.



**Black Polystyrene**, which is just one of the many items the company transports.

The company also makes an average 70 truckload shipments per day throughout California and the greater Southwest.

Many of these shipments involve special stainless steel circular containers built to handle hazmat goods. The containers are designed to withstand six rolls at 60 mph, or a head-on collision at 30 mph.

The containers are virtually leak-proof, and can be built to keep cargo cooled or heated to a desired temperature.

When transporting something like tallow (melted animal fat), which Ventura does on occasion, it's important to keep the product in a liquid state. Otherwise, someone's going to spend a long time scraping that tank clean when delivery arrives.

The company has locations alongside or very near several rail lines connecting the western United States, including one in Carson and the headquarters on the border between Long Beach and Carson.

Oken estimates that nearly 90 percent of the goods Ventura ships is at some point taken by rail. This is due in part to the fact railcars can hold four times as much cargo as a truck — making it a more economically

sound choice for many businesses, Ring said.

VTC is also situated next to the nation's busiest port complex in Long Beach/Los Angeles, which provides a unique advantage to its customer base.

"We have more than 120 rail car spots at our two facilities in the Long Beach area, which makes it easier, quicker and more affordable to transload from truck to rail or rail to truck," Ring said.

The company delivers to 151 customers in Long Beach alone, and counts more than 580 clients in Southern California.

## Company start

All the company's high-tech shipping equipment, access to railroads and innovation belies the fact that it began as a one-cart operation in a sleepy seaside town more than 130 years ago.

Founded in 1869 in Ventura, the business originally hauled cargo from sailing vessels anchored off the coast of Ventura. At the time, there was no wharf in the area, so freight was brought to land aboard small boats and by hand, then hauled onshore, loaded onto horse-drawn carriages and delivered to its destination.

Ventura's business really took off with the arrival of the railroad in the 1870s and an oil boom in the 1880s, Ring said.

Using drums filled with crude and other goods, the company began expanding its enterprise across the area around Ventura.

It began doing business in the Long Beach area around 1946, and was purchased by a local family — headed by patriarch Jack Clifford — in 1957.

Clifford's four sons own the operation today.

The company is also moving to establish more environmentally friendly practices.

It uses propane to power most of

the portable broilers and forklifts operated around its rail and trucking yards.

It has also built concrete roads around its railyards with drains emptying into self-containing storage tanks capable of holding 20,000-plus gallons of spilled chemical.

Although that scenario has never played out, at least company officials can say that if it did, the toxins wouldn't go down the drain into the ocean.

"In the end, the No. 1 thing for us is that we maintain our safety record while providing our customers with the highest-level service possible," Oken said. "We have to maintain both or we'll lose the advantage we hold over our competitors."



**A special lift** moves large tanks of liquid that are stacked on top of each other at the Ventura Transfer Company in Long Beach.