



LTL Freight Shipping: A Crash Course

Food-grade grain growers are likely to encounter situations when they need to ship amounts of grain that are less than what a semi truck can carry (“LTL,” meaning less-than-truckload or less-than-load), but more than what a pickup truck can haul. These amounts would be represented by, for example, a grain lot that fits in one gravity wagon, or in 4 to 10 FIBC bags (Flexible Intermediate Bulk Container, also called grain totes (insert picture of grain totes)). Sometimes grain needs to be transported hundreds of miles to a cleaner or a buyer. Freight shipping companies can typically accomplish shipping these amounts more economically than a farmer, or a farmer may not have time to conduct the transportation themselves. In this case, farmers need to engage a freight shipping company.

What to Know About LTL Freight Shipping

You may be able to find a freight shipping company that services your area via the internet. Search terms like “freight,” “shipping,” and “LTL.” You can also search for freight shipping LTL brokers who can help make arrangements. If you have time, get multiple quotes from different companies to receive the best price. Or, find a company whose customer service works with your operation—you can do this by asking fellow farmers in your area who they use, or through experience.

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Questions to Ask Your Carrier or Freight Broker Before You Ship

- Some carriers will not accept FIBC bags because they view their ability to be punctured as too great of a liability. Be sure to communicate clearly how your grain is packed for shipment, and make sure it fits with the carrier's policies.
- Most LTL shipping promises delivery in 1 to 3 days but be sure to ask and verify guaranteed delivery times, and stay in touch with the recipient of the grain regarding delivery time.
- Many LTL carriers do not call before pickup, or do not necessarily provide a pickup window—this can be inconvenient if you do not have an office where your grain is stored, as then you need to sit at your farm and wait for the shipper to come (ugh!). Ask before scheduling if the driver can call before they come. Be aware that some carriers charge an extra fee for this service.
- Ask what standard freight insurance is included in the standard quote and services, and make sure it would cover your real losses in case something happens to your product during the shipping process.



How much does LTL shipping cost? Is it cheaper than me transporting the grain myself?

Because LTL shippers can fit multiple customers' orders on a truck, generally it is cheaper for them to transport your products than for you to, unless the trip takes less than one day and you can fit the load on a vehicle you already have. However, working with a shipping company may be unreliable or complicated, which can make nominal dollar savings not worth it to you. It might be worth trying both methods and deciding what makes more sense for your operation. The advantages of shipping LTL include savings of time and money for the grower, but a disadvantage can be increased risk of your shipment getting damaged because the carriers make multiple stops and pickups. Careful packing can help decrease the risk of your totes getting damaged.

What is the best way to ship grain? How should I package the grain?

Most farmers shipping LTL freight ship grain in FIBC bags set on pallets. The grower will likely not get the grain containers returned so shipping in FIBC bags means you can ship grain in a container that is inexpensive and that you can afford to send one way. These bags sit nicely on a pallet, or can be picked up via loops on the top with forks. Disadvantages of FIBC bags include having a fabric texture that can easily be chewed by pests or punctured with forks on a forklift, for instance, spilling grain.

We recommend wrapping your FIBC bags in pallet wrap plastic to provide a little extra cushion in case they encounter objects that can puncture their fabric. Large plastic wrap on rolls is available at most big-box hardware stores, but it's not as thick as commercial-grade pallet wrap, so you may want to order pallet wrap (also called "stretch wrap") online ahead of time. FIBC bags that are too large will not fit on standard-size pallets, so you may want to stick with shipping in 2,000-lb bags, or bags that are smaller than pallet dimensions (e.g., 35 x 35 x 40 inch).

It's also recommended that you strap the bags down to pallets using ratchet straps, or something similar. Too large bags can tip over and off pallets during transport, and even smaller bags can tip off—strapping down will ensure your shipper does not have trouble moving your bags around the truck.

I've found a company, and they sent me labels and a Bill of Lading. What do I do with these documents?

Freight brokers can help you set up these documents, which are needed by your LTL carrier. Review the labels and Bill of Lading that is sent to you for accuracy, for what is included in the shipment. Labels should be firmly affixed to each of your grain containers, and you will need to print the Bill of Lading to hand to the carrier when they pick up. The Bill of Lading is a detailed list of goods in the form of a receipt given by the carrier to the person/entity receiving the goods. Retain the Bill of Lading in your records in case of any future discrepancy.