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Shippers should expect declining container ship reliability over the near term, reports the Journal of Commerce (JOC).

Carriers' schedule reliability worsened in every quarter of 2013 and is only going to get worse over the next few months as carriers skip more voyages in their drive to cut costs, according to Drewry. Average on-time reliability dropped below 64% in the fourth quarter, the lowest it has been since it hit 61% in the third quarter of 2011, Drewry said in its latest Carrier Performance Insight report. The fourth quarter mark was down 11.4 points from the same quarter in 2012, when the all trades average reached a peak of 75.2 percent. The Drewry report confirms the dismal record reported earlier this week by SeaIntel, which said container ships reached their destination ports around the world on time 79.5% of the time in 2013, down 1.1% from 80.6% in 2012.

"The focus on reliability seems to have been lost in the current cost-cutting environment. Shippers are now paying more for poorer services," said Simon Heaney, senior manager of supply chain research at Drewry. He said that although there is no concrete proof that the increasing number of cancelled voyages in the fourth quarter was the cause of declining reliability, the pattern seemed clear. "Although carriers have announced most cancelled voyages in advance, it is the last-minute cancellations that are hurting reliability." Declining reliability could hurt carriers when they seek general rate increases (GRIs). "Shippers know that lines are saving money, so they will be unwilling to accept further rate increases," Heaney said.

This could provide an opportunity for more reliable carriers to secure better rates." According to the Drewry report, Maersk Line maintained its position as the most reliable major carrier in the industry in a generally poor fourth quarter when most of its competitors suffered a free-fall in on-time ship arrivals. Maersk achieved 80% on-time reliability in the fourth quarter, improving its all-trade reliability by 0.8 points. It was one of only eight carriers to improve on their third-quarter performance. Evergreen Line's rose from 11th to second place with a 74% on-time result. Despite a four-point decline, Yang Ming ranked third with an on-time average of 73%. Mediterranean Shipping Co., which had previously climbed in the ranks of on-time performance, dropped to the bottom of the list in the fourth quarter, with an average of 48%, behind CSAV at 51%