

SAFE AND SOUND in Saudi



Safety and quality are key watchwords for Aldrees Bertschi Logistics Services, a terminal operator with an enviable reputation in a demanding physical environment.


Covering an area of 100,000 m² and able to store up to 8,000 TEUs, the Aldrees Bertschi terminal in Saudi Arabia is, as managing director Andreas Nebiker puts it, "big" to say the least. A joint venture established in 2013 between Switzerland-headquartered global logistics provider Bertschi and Riyadh-based Aldrees Petroleum & Transport Services, the facility is located in close proximity to the Jubail Industrial Area Two and is linked directly to the Abu Hadriya Highway, giving it "very short access routes" to key customers from the chemical, petrochemical and allied industries among others.

Operating on a 24/7 basis and offering a one-stop-shop suite of terminal and logistics services, ranging from cross-docking and customs clearance to integration with the Bertschi global tank container network, the terminal is fully certified to store a full range of loaded and empty box and tank containers, including units filled with UN Class 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 dangerous goods. Furthermore, since the summer of 2018 the site has also operated a state-of-the-art Weidner tank cleaning station. "The facility has two washing lines with a total of four washing bays for tank containers or two washing bays for road tankers. We can clean most hazardous goods and can also offer 2½- and 5-year inspections as well as other repair and maintenance work," he explains.

While exact figures vary from month to month, tank containers typically account for around 20 per cent of the terminal's total occupancy. Meanwhile, with local Middle Eastern firms comprising the bulk of customers, around 80 per cent of containers handled are usually destined for export trades. One local company to use the terminal is Sadara. "In 2017 we won the contract with Sadara for the storage and distribution of empty containers. To date, we have completed over 650,000 accident-free handlings," Nebiker reports.

Strict on safety

The upshot of "a strict, fair and permanent" observance of safety, coupled with extensive training, is an achievement that would be impressive in any global location. However, in the Middle East, where the largely South and South-East Asian workforce may have a different chemical education and hazard awareness to their Western counterparts, this milestone is even more remarkable. "We have invested a lot of time to train our staff and now we see the result of that," Nebiker says, reporting that Bertschi's own safety, health, environment and quality (SHEQ) team provided "a lot of support" in helping to foster a thorough safety culture. "Bertschi has an excellent name in the market and it was clear from the beginning that our joint venture must operate to the same level. There is no room for mistakes," he says. ➔



Andreas Nebiker,
managing director,
Aldrees Bertschi terminal, Saudi Arabia



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Fully signed up to the Safety & Quality Assessment for Sustainability (SQAS) initiative, the Aldrees Bertschi terminal employs two safety officers, one of whom is a chemical engineer, as well as three qualified Dangerous Goods Safety Advisors (DGSAs), including Nebiker himself. What's more, Nebiker takes a dim view of anyone failing to adhere to the site's safety procedures, reporting, for example, that any drivers arriving at the site will be barred should they put people or property at risk through their actions or lack of attention. There are many potential hazards associated with the cleaning of empty tank containers, a matter Nebiker and his team were keen to address right from the start.

Quality cleaning

"Every product that is to be cleaned by us is checked," he explains. "After thorough checking, the product is rejected or accepted. If the product is accepted, the tank container cleaner and the safety officers are informed accordingly and the tank cleaning programme is selected. Before the cleaning starts, the tank container and the product are checked by the safety officer and if everything is correct, released for cleaning. After cleaning, the tank is checked inside for damage and then released for either repair or reuse."

But there's more to it than just that. "First of all, our cleaners have regular medical check-ups every three months. Secondly, our cleaners are regularly trained on dangerous goods and we have rescue and first aid training every three months. Our cleaners are all equipped with a gas detector and know when not to enter a tank container," he says, adding that all residues are collected and processed by "a certified and ministry-approved recycling company" in accordance with all applicable regulations.

A tough environment

Given the geography of the Arabian Peninsula, however, chemical hazards are certainly not the only matters the facility has to contend with on a day-to-day basis. "We have two difficulties. One of them is the heat," Nebiker states, revealing that daytime summer temperatures often surpass 50°C and two years ago even hit a truly sweltering 57°C. The second is sandstorms, which this year have occurred more frequently than usual, happening "every week" since the start of January.

"We can work a certain time in a sandstorm but then we have to stop because it becomes too dangerous," he says. After all, in such strong winds, which may last a few hours or a whole day, a tank or box container acts like a sail when lifted by a reach stacker, putting staff, equipment and the products inside at far too great a risk to warrant the continuation of operations.

To help cope with these environmental factors, the terminal maintains five covered hangars with a total of 270 bays where sensitive product can be shaded from the sun. Here they

are regularly inspected and monitored to reduce the risks of overheating and product expansion. Fortunately, many tank containers, such as those operated by Bertschi, feature integral insulation that can allow filling products to withstand temperatures of around 60-70°C. However, not all units are so well protected and Nebiker recalls occasions where tank containers filled with UN Class 3 flammable liquids had to be doused with water every few hours to keep them safe.

With demand for its services continuing to rise, Aldrees Bertschi is currently adding a further 162 covered bays as part of a new construction programme that will also result in the first temperature-controlled storage facility for tank containers in the Jubail region. Customers will therefore soon be able to store their products at a constant temperature of 28°C, which is significantly lower than the "permanently high" outdoor temperatures that even at night never dip below 30°C in the summer.

But it's not just tank containers that feel the heat. So too do we, which is why staff working outside are required to take regular breaks in an air-conditioned lounge to help them stay healthy. And on that note, Nebiker reports that while a certain virus did see staff having to adhere to a range of pandemic-related restrictions over the past two years, the facility itself was kept continually busy with no obvious drop-offs in demand.

Supply chain disruptions

While the Covid pandemic appears in general to be abating, its ramifications continue to show themselves in a number of ways and not just in terms of container shortages. "The problem we face today is the availability of spare parts," Nebiker says, explaining that waiting times for anything from pallet nails to new reach stackers keep lengthening, with the latter example now anywhere up to a year or more.

This is clearly an issue for any facility that relies upon significant amounts of plant and equipment to function - from forklifts to air conditioning - and Aldrees Bertschi has therefore adopted a number of steps to help ease the situation. These include trying to stockpile as many key components as possible while also rewarding staff with monthly bonuses for avoiding damage to equipment.

Even with best will in the world, though, wear and tear are inevitable and no company can be expected to keep an inexhaustible supply of replacement parts on its premises. "The biggest nightmare is if you have to shut down your machinery because you don't have a spare part that costs maybe €1 or less," he says. Of course, whether all this is just a temporary interruption or not is something only time will tell. One thing seems certain to remain unchanged: Aldrees Bertschi's commitment to safety and quality. As Nebiker puts it, "safety protects people and quality protects jobs." ■