

# Seabridge crisis exposed: Scheduling is the issue, says feed supplier

...James: It's structural dependence



A truck drives into the MV Blue Wave Harmony at the Port-of-Spain Ferry Terminal on Monday. PHOTO BY FAITH AYOUING



Economist Dr Vanus James



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Long before her doors officially open at 7:30 am, Marsha Peters (not her real name) is already standing in the centre aisle of her small minimart in Carnbee.

Staring at a half-empty shelf that once held pantry staples now serves only as a visual reminder of a broken supply chain.

Only three tins of condensed milk remain, the bread rack is bare and the spaces where flour and rice usually sit are empty, recalling a shipment that never arrived.

“It’s the first time in years, I’ve seen it this bad,” she said.

Her concern is shared across Tobago, a problem that Tobago economist Dr Vanus James described as elements of a much deeper national malaise.

This frustration erupted into a public alarm earlier this week as the scale of the shortage became impossible to ignore.

Two days ago, the island's business community issued urgent warnings that Tobago is running low on supplies and consumers should brace for rising prices as the sea bridge crisis deepens.

Reports indicated worsening shortages, with businesses cautioning that the economic pressure on households and businesses could escalate and the anxiety reached a breaking point over the weekend when a single logistical failure paralysed the island's inflow of goods.

The situation intensified when the cargo vessel Blue Wave Harmony, expected to leave Portof-Spain last Friday night, failed to depart, leaving Tobago's businessowners waiting for stock that never arrived.

This unexpected delay added fresh strain to stores already dependent on timely shipments to stay afloat.

Yet, for many residents, the failure of the Blue Wave Harmony felt like a hauntingly familiar ghost from the past.

What Tobago is experiencing now is not new. The island has lived through repeated collapses of the sea bridge over the years.

During earlier disruptions—mechanical failures of the Cabo Star, extended dry docking periods, or emergency vessel rotations—Tobagonians faced the same troubling pattern: shortages of meat, bread, flour, water, cement and steel.

Each time the bridge fails or there are disruptions in sailings, the island's economy follows suit.

The sea bridge has long been a single point of failure, with each breakdown placing Tobago at the mercy of Trinidad's port rhythms, vessel maintenance cycles, and now, as many business owners argue, flawed scheduling decisions.

No one understands this better than Ray Thomas, Tobago's largest feed supplier, who has spent years navigating the fragile logistics chain that links Trinidad's mills to Tobago's farms and businesses.

When asked whether the current problem is insufficient feed, Thomas quickly clarified, “It’s not that the feed supply is the issue because if you say feed supply, you’re implicating the mill. The feed supply is not the problem. The issue is the time that the boat sails.”

Thomas offered a real time example.

“This morning (Tuesday), the boat came in at 7:10. It’s a very large boat with a lot of capacity.

But to unshackle it and have vehicles start to come off takes 45 minutes to an hour. By the time offloading really starts, the fast ferry comes in at 9:55. Cargo operations have to stop to facilitate passengers. So everything halts.”

What followed is a cascade of delays as Thomas further explained, “Offloading pauses, resumes and then stops again for the port’s lunch hour at 11. Drivers wait stranded for hours with no cargo released.”

These delays compound into lost sailings. If a business fails to have a container offloaded in time to reload and send back to Trinidad, the next opportunity may be days away.

“With the luck of the draw mine (container) could come out before yours, yours could come out before me. But it’s lunchtime now so you have to wait until 12 o’clock when they start that operation, then the person would know if he gets in the container now or 1 o’clock. How does he offload it to fetch back the boat? How can he catch back the boat to go back to Trinidad because the next sailing day is let’s say it’s Wednesday.

“So, when you miss today, it means you didn’t have a container there, so your next sailing day or opportunity is going to be Friday. It’s actually one sailing per week when they used to get three and four. That is where the real issue is. Why they choose that time? It just doesn’t make sense because the boat loads between 7 am and 2 pm and leaves at 10 in the night,” Thomas explained.

It is not just feed that is affected.

Thomas described a supplier arriving for flour—only to wait through lunch, miss the cut-off, and face another delay.

“All goods and services are affected by the timing,” he said.

“Even trucks already on the vessel are often stuck onboard when operations stop. They can’t come off the boat because the operation has stopped. It’s lunchtime.”

When pressed on whether Tobago should have its own feed mill, Thomas cautioned that raw materials—corn and grains—are imported.

“We don’t plant anything here.

Not even corn. So forex comes into play,” he said.

### What Tobago needs

For him, the issue is simpler: Tobago needs two medium-sized cargo vessels, not one oversized behemoth whose schedule creates bottlenecks.

“A big, big boat is not the solution. What you need is two boats, the size of the Warrior Spirit or Panorama. When one goes on dry dock, at least you have one.

You don’t need everybody rushing, fighting for space, bouncing mirrors and reversing into each other,” he said.

Ultimately, Thomas believes the Government needs to commission a custom-built vessel, designed specifically for Tobago’s cargo mix, trucker comfort and operational realities.

“When you’re driving a truck and trailer at 11 pm you need cabins.

You need rest. A boat built to specification—that is the solution,” he added.

### Structural dependence

Yet even if Tobago solved the timing, vessel design and operational inefficiencies, the island would still face its deeper structural vulnerability.

James, whose analyses of Tobago’s economic architecture have shaped national conversation for years, has consistently argued that the seabridge crisis is not merely an operational issue—it is an economic one.

James argued the ferry's troubles are a symptom, not the disease.

“The core of this story is a logistics bottleneck that has evolved into a food security threat,” he said, “But it also lays bare a deeper, long-standing fragility— Tobago's economic dependence on Trinidad for both income and imports.”

In fiscal terms, that dependence is stark as James stated that about 82 per cent of the expenditure by government in Tobago is funded by the Trinidad economy.

“Tobago's existence model has been to depend on Trinidad for a share of its imports and its income.

The air and sea bridges are aspects of that dependence.

Every year, it receives those transfers and is not held to account for its stewardship on economic development.

“Currently, the economy of Tobago cannot support its own inter-island ferry, let alone a substantial and viable international transit hub. That too would have to be funded by transfers from Port-of-Spain, just as is the current inter-island shipping service,” he added.

While James agreed there is a massive opening for third-party logistics firms to establish largescale, climate-controlled warehousing in Tobago which could shift from “just-in-time” to “justin-case” inventory resulting in Tobago businesses surviving 14-day ferry disruptions without empty shelves, he noted the inventory would still be imported from Trinidad and be paid for mainly by transfers from Trinidad.

James maintained that the conversation must expand beyond the seabridge.

“For decades, national policy has paid too little attention to developing Tobago's export base as a leading edge of diversification,” he said, adding that the island sits closer to Atlantic lanes than Trinidad and has a natural site for a modern port complex adjacent to ANR Robinson International Airport—assets that could anchor direct international flows, support cold-chain agribusiness, and connect Tobago outward to the region rather than only inward to Port-of-Spain.