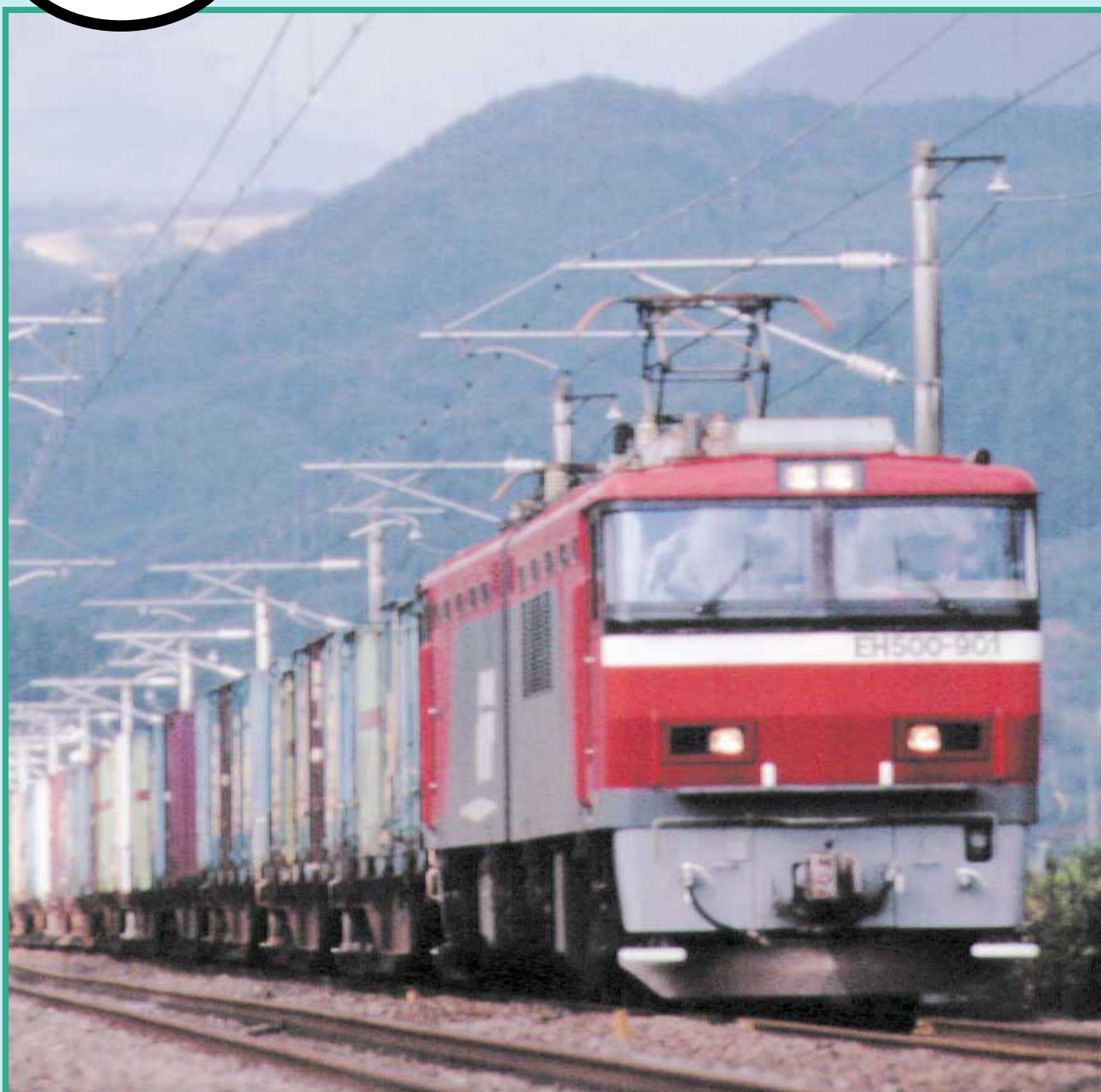


JRTIR

Japan Railway & Transport Review



SPECIAL ARTICLE: Railway Reforms in Europe
FEATURE: Trends in Rail Freight

**JAPAN RAILWAY &
TRANSPORT REVIEW**

February 2001 No. 26

JAPAN RAILWAY & TRANSPORT REVIEW
published quarterly by
East Japan Railway Culture Foundation
(EJRRCF)

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JRTR is printed in Japan.



JR Freight's powerful multi-current
EH500 pulling Sapporo-bound
container express from Tokyo on
Tohoku Main Line near Shin Shirakawa
(The Railway Pictorial)

Editorial

Bright Freight Future?

Railways were happy when they were carrying heavy bulk cargoes such as coals or ores, because road transport could never cope with such goods as efficiently as trains. Railways in some countries still enjoy transporting such goods. Railways are also still happy in carrying goods over very long distances in vast countries like the USA, Canada, Russia and China, where trains are more efficient than trucks. However, due to changes in industrial structure, railways in developed middle-sized countries such as Western Europe and Japan have lost their traditional markets and are experiencing difficulties in transporting new high-value consumer products that are lighter and less bulky. Such cargoes usually require punctuality and accurate delivery, which can be achieved more easily by road transport.

Combined transport once looked like a good solution, but the reality is that the growth has not been as big as expected in middle-sized countries. There are many obstacles including technical problems in road-rail transfer, limited loading gauge, overall costs, etc. Combined transport could certainly work in some sections, such as the Channel Tunnel or Alpine tunnels, where piggybacked trucks can effectively overcome natural barriers, but otherwise progress seems very slow.

Some expect that environmental pressures will finally benefit railways, but railways in developed areas cannot be too optimistic, because the auto industry is working hard on technical solutions to minimize pollution. Without further technical and economical improvement and without being effectively integrated in a total distribution system, rail freight in Western Europe and Japan may never have a bright future.

T. SUGA

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