

CMR consignment note: the central documentation standard in international road freight transport

The CMR consignment note is the international transport document for cross-border road freight transport and is based on the Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Goods by Road (CMR). For technical buyers and suppliers, it is the central document of evidence and control along the transport chain. It records the date of receipt, condition and quantity of the goods as well as the responsibilities between consignor, carrier and consignee. A correctly completed consignment note minimises disputes over damage and delays and is a prerequisite for smooth customs clearance and goods receipt.

Key facts

- The CMR consignment note is a mandatory document for carriage by road in international transport between contracting states of the CMR Convention.
- It fulfils three functions: evidence of the contract of carriage, confirmation of receipt and a handover record of the condition and quantity of the goods.
- In practice, three originals and usually one to two copies of the consignment note are carried and signed by the consignor, carrier and consignee.
- Unlike the bill of lading in sea freight, the CMR consignment note does not confer any ownership rights to the goods and is not a document of title.
- Particulars concerning dangerous goods, special handling and customs data must be accurate and complete, as the consignor is liable for their correctness.
- The use of an electronic version (e-CMR) is increasingly common in practice and is legally recognised in many European countries.

Definition: CMR consignment note

The CMR consignment note is a standardised transport document that evidences the conclusion and content of an international road freight transport contract. It is structured in CMR box numbers 1 to 24 and contains particulars on the consignor, carrier, consignee, goods, packaging, customs data and delivery modalities.

Legal background

The basis is the CMR Convention of 1956, which applies to contracts of carriage in cross-border road freight transport between member states. It governs, among other things, the carrier's liability, time limits for damage notifications and the evidentiary value of the document. For domestic transport, the German Commercial Code (HGB) applies in Germany, while Austria and Switzerland are governed by their respective national regulations; nevertheless, practice frequently follows the CMR standard in order to keep processes uniform.

Distinction from other transport documents

In sea freight, the bill of lading serves as a document of title with a function of ownership, and in air freight the Air Waybill. The CMR consignment note is not a document of title and does not transfer any right of disposal; it merely documents the contract of carriage and the condition of the goods on collection and handover. For loading in combined transport, it frequently supplements valid Incoterms agreements that define the allocation of costs and risks between buyer and supplier. A wrongly chosen Incoterm can result in the CMR particulars and the contractual responsibilities diverging.

Content and completion in practice

A complete consignment note is typically generated in the consignor's dispatch order or TMS system and handed over to the carrier digitally or in paper form. The boxes must reflect the actual transport circumstances, in particular for dangerous goods and customs clearance.

Core boxes of the consignment note

Essential boxes are consignor and consignee (boxes 1–4), place of loading and unloading (boxes 5–6), description of goods, harmonised customs tariff level (box 6 and 12), number and type of packages (boxes 8–11), dangerous goods particulars (box 13) as well as instructions such as temperature control or customs formalities (boxes 14–15).

- Box 12: goods tariff and gross weight — decisive for customs and load control
- Box 13: dangerous goods particulars including UN number, class and packing group
- Box 22/23: receipt and collection endorsements with date, place and signature

Signatures and reservations

In practice, three original copies are typically used: one remains with the consignor, one accompanies the goods to the consignee and one remains with the carrier. On handover, the consignee checks for visible damage and records it by way of a reservation (reservation within the meaning of the CMR Articles). Without a reservation, the goods are deemed externally to have been handed over in good condition; concealed damage must be reported in writing within short time limits. These time limits and the liability amounts generally follow the CMR provisions and should be examined legally on a case-by-case basis.

e-CMR and digital processes

The electronic version (e-CMR) is increasingly used and is legally recognised in a growing number of European countries. Its advantages lie in the ability to update during transport, in searching archive records and in avoiding duplicates in the document repository. Implementation requires a clear regulation of signature processes and integration into the transport management system.

KPIs and metrics surrounding the consignment note

The CMR consignment note is not itself a KPI, but it provides data for key transport and quality metrics. Buyers and logistics managers use these to evaluate freight forwarders and to control scheduling.

Documentation quality

The rate of consignment notes completed fully and correctly should in practice typically be above 98 per cent. Incorrect boxes lead to delays in customs clearance, to subsequent claims or to disputes in

damage settlements. Common sources of error are incomplete dangerous goods particulars, deviating package counts and missing consignee signatures.

Damage and reservation statistics

From the reservation entries and damage notifications, metrics such as damage rate per consignment, average settlement duration and the proportion of complained-about deliveries can be derived. These figures frequently feed into supplier evaluations and into the Risk Mitigation Plan for critical transport routes.

Link with scheduling and inventory metrics

The date of receipt on the CMR is a key reference date for scheduling and inventory valuation. Deviations between the agreed and the documented delivery date affect availability, inventory values and, in defined cases, contractual penalties. Those who maintain clean data here can also reliably control early payment discount rates and payment releases, as payment is usually tied to the documented receipt.

Risks and controls for the CMR consignment note

Incorrect or incomplete consignment notes are one of the most common causes of disputes in international transport. Preventive controls and clear responsibilities significantly reduce this risk.

Typical risks

Common risks are missing or incorrect dangerous goods particulars, damage not documented on handover, deviating package counts and originals not carried. With multi-drop loads, the allocation of consignments to consignees is prone to error. The carrier's liability limits and the short notification periods for concealed damage exacerbate the risk for both parties.

- Missing reservation for visible damage — loss of the claim
- Inconsistency between the commercial contract (Incoterms) and the consignment note particulars
- Incomplete customs data with consequences for customs clearance and release
- Lack of traceability where there are several original copies

Controls and responsibilities

A clear allocation of tasks along the process is recommended, for example according to the RACI model: dispatch prepares and checks, the carrier takes over, goods receipt inspects and records deviations. A system-supported duplicate check and structured specification management for packaging, labelling and dangerous goods classification reduce errors at source. With high consignment volumes, sample and spot checks are customary.

Incident management and containment

Where damage or shortfalls are documented, a short-term containment applies: affected parts are blocked, the damage is documented and the cause is recorded in the presence of the carrier. These processes form part of the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) and of risk-based supplier management. In the event of repeated incidents, the incident belongs in the negotiation record with the freight forwarder and can be reflected in price sheet or price band/corridor adjustments.

Role of the CMR consignment note in the procurement process

For buyers, the CMR consignment note is more than a transport document: it is evidence of quantities, deadlines and condition and therefore the basis for payment, complaints and supplier evaluation. Its importance grows with the relevance of transparency and sustainability requirements.

Integration into procurement processes

In tenders and direct awarding, transport, documentation and reservation requirements should be defined in a binding manner. The documented date of receipt also plays a role in specification management and in fine planning of procurement capacities, as it makes delivery capability and availability measurable. In outsourcing potential analyses and when establishing new delivery routes, the consignment note process forms part of the standard review.

Customs, compliance and sustainability

The consignment note provides base data for customs clearance, proofs of origin and, where applicable, evidence within the scope of CO accounting. In the context of the Product Carbon Footprint (PCF), transport routes and modes of transport can be derived from the consignment note data. Market monitoring of customs and documentation requirements is part of procurement's ongoing duty, particularly in new markets.

Integration into system landscapes

Consignment note data typically flows into ERP, transport management and warehouse systems. A well-maintained material group hierarchy tree facilitates the allocation of consignments to material and supplier groups. Reports such as an Inventory Health Dashboard or an inventory and consignment cockpit benefit from clean receipt data; at the same time, correct documentation reduces the workload in the quality department for complaints and series release processes.

Typical metrics

Documentation quality: > 98 %

Proportion of consignment notes completed fully and correctly

Damage rate: < 1 %

Proportion of consignments with documented damage, depending on industry and mode of transport

Settlement duration: < 30 days

Average duration of damage claims settlement in practice

Practical example

A medium-sized mechanical engineering company with suppliers in several European countries repeatedly experienced disputes over damage and quantity discrepancies in received steel components. The cause was frequently incorrect or incomplete CMR consignment notes without reservations. After a targeted chain of measures, the dispute rate fell significantly and the settlement duration for damage claims shortened noticeably.

- Introduction of a mandatory check of CMR boxes 1 to 15 before loading by the dispatch department
- Training of goods receipt staff to record reservations in a documented manner for visible damage
- Agreement on the use of digital e-CMR with the main carrier

- Anchoring documentation quality in regular supplier evaluations

Conclusion

The CMR consignment note is the central document of evidence and control in international road freight transport for consignor, carrier and consignee. It documents the contract of carriage, the condition of the goods and the time of receipt and thus forms the basis for payment releases, complaints and schedule evaluation. For buyers and supply chain managers, a clean process and quality control pays off, as errors here have a direct impact on costs and delivery capability. The growing adoption of the electronic version reduces effort and increases transparency. Those who consistently link documentation, responsibilities and sustainability data achieve measurably more stable transport and procurement processes.

Frequently asked questions

What is a CMR consignment note?

The CMR consignment note is the standardised transport document for international road freight transport between contracting states of the CMR Convention. It evidences the contract of carriage, the condition and quantity of the goods and their receipt by the consignee. It is not a document of title and does not confer any ownership rights.

Who is responsible for the CMR consignment note?

In practice, the consignor (sender) prepares the consignment note and bears responsibility for the accuracy of the particulars, especially concerning the goods and dangerous goods. The carrier checks these on collection and notes any irregularities. The consignee signs on handover and should expressly record visible damage by way of a reservation.

How many copies of the CMR consignment note are there?

In practice, three original copies are typically used: one for the consignor, one for the carrier and one accompanying the goods to the consignee. In addition, copies for customs and administrative purposes are customary. With e-CMR, physical copies are dispensed with, while the evidentiary function remains equivalent.

What happens if the CMR consignment note is incorrect?

Errors can lead to delays in customs clearance, to subsequent claims or to evidentiary problems in the event of damage. Visible damage must be recorded by way of a reservation upon handover, otherwise the goods are deemed to have been handed over in good condition. Concealed damage must be notified in writing within the short time limits defined in the CMR.

Is the electronic CMR (e-CMR) permitted in Germany?

The e-CMR is legally recognised in a growing number of European countries; its implementation requires technical and organisational prerequisites. The details depend on the respective national and contractual framework and should be examined on a case-by-case basis. In practice, e-CMR is used mainly where consignment volumes are high and freight forwarding processes are digitally mature.

Why does procurement need the CMR consignment note?

It serves as evidence of the date of receipt, quantity and condition and is therefore the basis for payment releases, complaints and supplier evaluations. It also provides data for customs clearance,

sustainability reporting and transport metrics. A well-managed consignment note process reduces disputes and improves scheduling and inventory control.