

# Argentina is about to export first LNG cargo



Bloomberg/Singapore

Argentina is offering its first-ever liquefied natural gas cargo, putting the nation on the verge of becoming a regular exporter of the fuel.

YPF SA, the state-run oil and gas producer, is seeking to sell a partial cargo from the Tango floating liquefaction unit, or FLNG, at Bahia Blanca, according to traders with knowledge of the matter. The company is currently negotiating the sale of the 30,000-cubic-metre shipment on a free-on-board basis for loading this summer, said the traders, who asked not to be identified as the information isn't public.

A YPF spokesman declined to comment on the cargo.

The cargo – while relatively small compared with standard shipments – will mark Argentina's transition from one of Latin America's biggest LNG importers into an exporter. That's being driven by growing gas production from the Vaca Muerta shale play. Another factor is the country's recession, which is hurting domestic demand. It's still an importer, however: In

March, it bought nine LNG cargoes in a tender. Argentina is following the path of other nations, which recently resumed exports after domestic output surged. Last year, YPF signed a 10-year contract with Belgium's Exmar NV to deploy an FLNG plant to produce and export the fuel. The Tango FLNG docked at the port of Bahia Blanca in February. Energy Secretary Gustavo Lopetegui said in April that YPF would ship its first cargo as soon as August. The plant will produce as many as eight cargoes per year from the Vaca Muerta at the Neuquen Basin, Exmar said last year.

<https://www.gulf-times.com/story/631920/Argentina-is-about-to-export-first-LNG-cargo>

---

**BP's investors unite over fears it's 'falling behind' on climate**



When BP Plc meets with shareholders next week, it'll be facing one of the clearest signals yet that the fossil-fuel business is facing an adapt-or-die reckoning.

A resolution at the company's annual general meeting on May 21 will ask BP to prove in a series of reports how individual capital investments, and its overall business strategy, are aligned with the goals of the Paris climate accord. The proposal already has the backing of almost a tenth of the company's shareholders, including seven of the oil major's 20 largest stockholders, such as Legal & General Investment Management Ltd., and UBS Asset Management.

The resolution is intended to make BP address climate change sooner and is one of many examples of investors seeking to pressure companies. Shareholders have forced the issue now because at least four years of talks on the issue with management were "moving slowly," said the director of stewardship at Hermes EOS, who took the lead on speaking to BP.

"We felt the company was falling behind other competitors in terms of its ambitions," Bruce Duguid, at Hermes, said in an interview. Right now "there's not a clear demonstration that the company's strategy is consistent with the goals of the

Paris agreement.”

BP said earlier this year it supports the resolution and asked all shareholders to vote for it at the meeting. If a majority do, it will be legally binding.

The company said it will begin including the information requested in its 2019 annual report, which will be released in about a year. It should show which projects are high-cost or most polluting, the riskiest sorts of investment in a world trying to wean itself off carbon.

Talks with BP became especially pointed last year as competitor Royal Dutch Shell Plc defined its long-term ambitions around climate change, which is to halve its net carbon footprint by 2050 and ultimately pivot to cleaner fuels.

BP in contrast has been focused on paying more than \$60 billion in fines and legal costs associated with spilling millions of barrels of crude into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The company has now returned to sound financial footing and plans to rapidly expand its oil and gas output to reach near parity with its larger peers.

“The fact that the company has now come through the Gulf of Mexico litigation and is now back to a growth strategy, is a key cause of the concern,” Duguid said.

While BP Chief Executive Officer Bob Dudley has spoken about his support for climate change action, he has taken aim at some measures the company has been asked to adopt. He said detailed disclosures can be fodder for class action lawyers which look to profit from minor and unpreventable inconsistencies.

The company has instead supported efforts such as the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative, which invests in low-carbon technologies. It has also bought stakes in solar and other renewable energy companies and it purchased an electric car-

charging company last year.

Duguid said BP still has fallen behind its competitors in defining how it will “transition” as the world cuts carbon from the energy system. He said he drafted the resolution in the autumn, with other investors, without knowing whether BP would support it. Ultimately 58 investors signed on as co-filers.

The engagement with BP was also aided by an 18-month old coalition of investors called Climate Action 100+. The group, which oversees about \$33 trillion in assets, is asking more than 150 of the largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters to align their business strategy with the Paris accord. Climate Action 100+ has already persuaded Shell to adapt short-term climate targets and convinced Glencore Plc to cut coal production.

“There’s 161 companies on the focus list, so around the world we’ve got groups of investors engaging with each one of those,” said Stephanie Pfeifer, head of the Climate Action 100+ group’s European arm. “There’s plenty of time to have more dialogue, and sort of ratchet up the asks, as well.”

---

**First Annual Eastern  
Mediterranean Energy  
Leadership Summit**



Interest in the Eastern Mediterranean has increased during the last years with the discovery of major gas fields such as Tamar, Leviathan and the giant Zohr field in Egypt. These have opened up major opportunities for new discoveries, but also for oil and gas investments in the region.

The **First Eastern Mediterranean Energy Leadership Summit** will be held at the **Divani Apollon Palace & Thalasso** in Athens, Greece, from **June 24 -25, 2019**. The event is organized by the Transatlantic Leadership Network, the University of Piraeus – MSc in Energy: Strategy, Law & Economics of the Department of International & European Studies, and SGT S.A.

Held at the Ministerial level, the Summit will gather together senior government officials and business executives from the energy market to identify crucial opportunities and challenges for continued commercial and geopolitical cooperation. Invited countries include the United States, members of the Three Seas Initiative, and countries surrounding the Eastern Mediterranean Region. During the conference diverse thoughts, ideas and best practices will be presented on how Eastern Mediterranean countries can best take advantage of their geographical positions and exploit available energy resources to secure a more reliable, self-sufficient and environmental sustainable energy supply.

**Topics of discussion:**

- The Future of Oil & Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Alternative Scenarios and Policy Perspectives
- Security Dimensions of Transatlantic Energy Cooperation: The Effects on the Eastern Mediterranean
- Opportunities for Energy Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean: Project View
- Building a Framework for Regional Energy Cooperation and Integration
- Energy Developments in South East Europe. The Challenge for the Region
- Market Trends: Predicting Winners and Losers
- Regional Electricity Market Dynamics
- Investment Outlook: Required Financial Resources and Remaining Challenges
- Removing Barriers and Exploiting Opportunities

## **SPEAKERS**



### **Kocho Angjushev**

Deputy Prime Minister  
Republic of North Macedonia



### **Francis R. Fannon**

Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Energy Resources  
U.S Department of State



# **Mirko Šarović**

Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations  
Bosnia and Herzegovina



# **Georgios Stathakis**

Minister of Environment and Energy  
Hellenic Republic



# **Dr. Ali Abu Sedra**

Law expert in Petrochemicals, Former Legal Advisor to the  
Ministry of Oil, Libya



# **Roudi Baroudi**

CEO  
Energy & Environment Holding, Qatar



# **Yannis Bassias**

President & CEO  
Hellenic Hydrocarbon Resources Management



# **Stephen Blank**

Senior Fellow for Russia  
American Foreign Policy Council





## **Ambassador John B. Craig**

Senior Partner  
Manaar Energy Group, Abu Dhabi



## **Prof. Nikolaos Farantouris**

Chair, Legal Affairs, EUROGAS, Brussels & General Counsel,  
DEPA, Greece



## **Michael Haltzel**

Chairman of the Board  
Transatlantic Leadership Network



## **Dr. Symeon Kassianides**

Chairman  
Natural Gas Public Company (DEFA)



## **Athanassios G. Platias**

Professor of Strategy  
University of Piraeus, Greece



## **H.E. Geoffrey Pyatt**

U.S. Ambassador to the Hellenic Republic



## **Megan Richards**

Director, Energy Policy in Directorate General for Energy  
European Commission



## **Sasha Toperich**

Senior Executive Vice President  
Transatlantic Leadership Network



## **Dr. Aristotle Tziampiris**

Professor of International Relations, Chair of the Department  
of International and European Studies  
University of Piraeus



## **Joseph F. Uddo III**

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Innovation and Market  
Development  
United States Department of Energy

---

# **Prices stable amid lack of end-user buying**



LONDON (Reuters) – Liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices in Asia held largely steady this week, taking a breather after recovering from a significant dip in March.

LNG for delivery in northeast Asia in June is estimated at \$5.60 per million British thermal units (mmBtu), the same level as last week.

The July price is seen at a slight contango – a market structure in which prompt prices are below later-dated prices – and is estimated at \$5.65 mmBtu.

Demand kept coming from trading and portfolio companies who are optimizing their positions in the Far East. Deals for June cargoes were done between \$5.50-5.60 in the Platts market on close (MOC) window this week.

Several companies are in talks to optimize their July positions as well, an LNG trader said.

One is the trading arm of Russian producer Novatek, which is looking to buy a cargo in the Pacific basin to cover a July delivery position in Asia, two market sources said.

A lack of end-user demand kept prices from rising however,

with some buyers offering to sell cargoes. China's PetroChina was offering a cargo in the Platts MOC window for late June delivery.

A spot cargo offered from Malaysia's Bintulu for early June loading likely didn't find a buyer, a shipping market source said.

In Europe, Spain's delivery prices are increasing on the back of higher gas demand in the country, two trade sources said.

Offers rose to above the level of the Dutch gas hub benchmark price as sellers see Spain having to compete for cargoes with other markets, one of the sources said.

There were several spot cargo offers in Europe. Novatek is selling a late May delivery cargo to northwest Europe from the Yamal plant, two sources said.

PetroChina, another offtaker from Yamal, has offered three cargoes for June delivery to Europe, one industry source said.

Front-month gas prices in the Netherlands and Britain fell by around 20 cents to around \$4.63 and \$4.24 per mmBtu respectively.

There were two diversions of cargoes from Europe to Mexico in the past week, indicating more attractive prices in the recent tenders of Mexican utility CFE compared to Europe.

---

## **America's LNG exports could**

# triple with Venture Global plan



Venture Global LNG Inc revealed a massive expansion of its plans to send super-chilled US natural gas overseas, a move that would almost triple the nation's ability to export the fuel. The Arlington, Virginia-based company will work with Baker Hughes to develop projects that could produce as much as 60mn tonnes of liquefied natural gas a year, double the previously announced amount. The increase is "based on customer demand," Venture Global said in a statement on Thursday. If Venture Global's plans come to fruition, the company would leapfrog Cheniere Energy Inc as the top US exporter, based on capacity. Venture Global just won approval to build its \$5bn Calcasieu Pass terminal in Louisiana and aims to break ground on another one twice the size by the end of this year. But competition in the industry is fierce. More than a dozen projects are vying to be part of the so-called second wave of US LNG exports, capitalising on the surge of gas production from shale basins. Demand for the fuel is climbing worldwide as nations including China and

India shutter or cancel coal plants in an effort to crack down on pollution. "This is going to be a strong year for LNG expansion and that will probably continue next year and beyond, simply because China and Asian demand for LNG is so strong," Stephen Ellis, equity strategist for Morningstar Inc in Chicago, said in a telephone interview. America's growing clout in the global energy market, including LNG, helps advance the nation's policy goals and contributes to security of supply across the world, Energy Secretary Rick Perry and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week at the CER-AWeek by IHS Markit conference in Houston. To meet growing gas demand, the US needs to build more LNG export projects than it has planned, Perry said. For developers like Cheniere and Venture Global, signing long-term contracts is a critical part of securing financing and starting construction. But two projects backed by major oil companies got the green light without such agreements in place: LNG Canada, the \$30bn British Columbia terminal backed by Royal Dutch Shell Plc, and the \$10bn Golden Pass project being built by Qatar Petroleum and Exxon Mobil Corp in Texas.

---

## **Gas Tax for Infrastructure Sparks Fears of Political Backlash**



Democrats and Republicans are quick to talk up a bipartisan infrastructure deal. Yet neither party wants to take the political risk of paying for it when all options are toxic – including the obvious choice of raising the national gas tax.

Increasing the gas tax is so politically fraught that it hasn't been touched in 26 years and it didn't even come up at a meeting at the White House Tuesday between President Donald Trump, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer to discuss an infrastructure plan.

While they agreed broadly on the need to upgrade roads, bridges and airports, they put off for three weeks the tougher conversation about coming up with ways to fund an estimated \$2 trillion in public works.

Taxes on fuel in the U.S. are among the lowest in the developed world, at 18.4 cents per gallon for gasoline and 24.4 cents per gallon for diesel, and infrastructure advocates see raising the levies for the first time since 1993 as the best short-term option to generate needed revenue.

Still, a measure that would disproportionately affect poor and rural drivers raises opposition at all levels of the political spectrum. It's also created strange bedfellows – aligning members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, born from the Tea Party movement, and progressives such as Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, a Democratic presidential candidate.

“Working people who have got to get to their job, get their kid to a medical appointment, shouldn't get hit again when multinationals are enjoying their big tax breaks and causing much of the wear and tear to the road,” said Ron Wyden of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, who was at the meeting.

## **Roll-Back Cuts**

Some Democrats, including Wyden and Schumer, have said they'd only consider increasing the gas tax if it's paired with a roll-back of tax cuts that benefited the rich in the 2017 tax overhaul. The 2018 Senate Democratic infrastructure plan called for raising taxes on top earners and corporations.

Even though Trump campaigned on a promise to invest at least \$1 trillion in infrastructure, the plan he released last year included only \$200 billion over a decade – mostly in incentives to spur investments by states, localities and the private sector.

Democrats said after their meeting with Trump on Tuesday that he offered no plan for financing infrastructure projects. They said they won't make any offers and will wait for the White House to make its proposal in three weeks. Democrats said Trump indicated he's soured on a public-private approach.

The White House statement after the meeting made no mention of an amount an amount or where the money would come from.

While Trump has said he's eager to work with Congress on



infrastructure, Democrats say Republicans won't go along unless the president publicly endorses a plan – especially if it includes a tax increase.

## **Closed-Door Meeting**

Lawmakers who attended a closed-door meeting with Trump a year ago said he told them then that he'd support a 25-cent-per-gallon increase in the gas tax and take the political heat. But Republican congressional leaders were opposed, and Trump never backed the idea publicly.

Now Trump's signaling that he's unlikely to support a gas-tax increase. In a tweet last Friday, he said the fuel tax in California "is causing big problems on pricing for that state" and "speak to your governor about reducing." California approved a 12-cent-per-gallon increase in 2017 to help pay for road and bridge projects, and voters defeated a Republican-led ballot measure to repeal it last November.

Asked by reporters on Tuesday whether Trump would raise the federal gas tax to help pay for an infrastructure package, White House adviser Kellyanne Conway said "this president is the president who lowers taxes."

Michael Ireland, the president and chief executive officer of the Portland Cement Association, said, "They're all afraid to go first."

"The truth is only the president can provide cover for his caucus," added Ireland, whose group backs a gas-tax increase. "Likewise, only the speaker and the Senate minority leader can provide cover for their members."

## **'D-Plus Level'**

Advocacy groups as diverse as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, the American Trucking Associations and others are advocating raising federal fuel taxes as the only realistic

way in the short term to generate the funding needed to address upgrades to public works from a “D-plus” level that the American Society of Engineers has estimated would cost \$2 trillion.

Still, a gas tax increase wouldn’t solve the problem. The Tax Foundation estimates that even raising the gas tax to 50 cents per gallon and indexing it to inflation would only generate about \$306 billion over a decade. That means lawmakers would have to agree on a whole package of tax measures – which is unlikely following the passage of Trump’s tax overhaul.

“Democrats are interested in raising income and corporate tax rates, but Republicans are not interested in unraveling their big signature achievement,” said Marc Gerson, a former House Ways and Means Committee aide who’s now at law firm Miller and Chevalier. “There is no agreement.”

## **Koch Campaign**

Americans for Prosperity, the flagship political organization of the network led by billionaire Charles Koch, recently began a campaign targeting 20 states and 30 congressional districts with digital ads and a report with Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce showing the impact of a 25-cent increase.

“Lawmakers in Washington must finally step up and focus on targeting transportation dollars toward critical road projects and reforming outdated and costly regulations,” the groups said.

Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said last month that he’s willing to take up the infrastructure issue “once the president and Democrats and everybody says, ‘OK, here is how we’re going to pay for it.’”

## State Increases

Some 30 states have raised their fuel taxes since 2003 – including Republican-led Ohio, Arkansas and Alabama this year – according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. States tack on an average tax of nearly 29 cents per gallon, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

While infrastructure advocates point out that state lawmakers haven't lost elections as a result, the local increases have eaten away at additional taxes that the federal government could try to put on gasoline.

Representative Sam Graves of Missouri, the top Republican on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, favors a system that charges a tax for every mile a vehicle travels. Even though some transportation experts say such a system poses privacy concerns and is still years away, Graves argues that a costly political battle to raise the gas tax would be a waste with greater fuel efficiency and more electric cars making it obsolete.

“I think where we're going to go ultimately is some kind of vehicle miles traveled tax,” said Senator Tom Carper, a Delaware Democrat. “Some of the discussions this week will be what will the bridge be that gets us to that future.”

---

## Iran oil exports to slide in May, 'but not to zero'



LONDON (Reuters) – Iranian oil exports will slide in May as the United States tightens the screws on Tehran’s main source of income, industry sources said, deepening global supply losses caused by U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and OPEC-led cuts.

The United States reimposed sanctions on Iran in November after pulling out of a 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and six world powers. Those sanctions have already more than halved Iranian oil exports to 1 million barrels per day (bpd) or less.

Washington, aiming to cut Iran’s sales to zero, said all sanctions waivers for those importing Iranian oil would end this week. Iran says this will not happen, although its officials are bracing for a drop in supplies.

One Iranian official familiar with oil policy said exports could drop to 700,000 bpd and as low as 500,000 bpd from May onwards. An OPEC source said Iranian exports would likely continue at about 400,000 to 600,000 bpd.

Iran would likely be able to maintain some shipments for debt

repayment to China and India, and into storage in China, and smuggle a limited extra amount as it did under previous sanctions, analyst Sara Vakhshouri said.

“It’s important to note that zero oil sales in May doesn’t mean that there will not be oil deliveries to China or India in the month,” she said.

“In total, Iran could export between 200,000 to 550,000 of oil. of which not all is sold oil.”

Analysts at Energy Aspects expect a drop in Iranian shipments to around 600,000 bpd from May onwards.

Iranian exports have become more opaque since U.S. sanctions returned in November. Tehran no longer reports its production figures to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and there is no definitive information on exports.

Some of Iran’s oil exports are already under the radar, making it harder to assess the actual volume.

The OPEC member exported between 1.02 million bpd and 1.30 million bpd of crude and condensate in April, Refinitiv Eikon and Kpler, a company that tracks oil flows, estimate.

## **OPEC HEADACHE**

The dearth of information is a headache for other OPEC members and allies, which meet to set oil supply policy in June. OPEC canceled an April meeting, partly due to this uncertainty.

Saudi Aramco, expected to be the main source of any extra oil to replace Iranian volumes, has been asking around in the market for estimates of Iranian exports, industry sources said.

Iranian oil officials have welcomed this opacity. Tehran insists it will keep selling oil and is examining new ways of doing so, Iranian oil minister, Bijan Zanganeh, was quoted as

saying on Wednesday.

Kayrros, a company that tracks oil flows, put Iranian crude exports in March at 1.40 million to 1.65 million bpd.

“The uncertainty band around the decline reflects residual uncertainty about the exact number of Iranian tankers that have been operating under the radar,” Kayrros said in a report.

The oil industry has for some years used tanker-tracking to work out actual supplies in the absence of timely official information. While easier than in the past due to satellite information, tanker tracking is still both art and science.

Tankers loading Iranian crude sometimes switch off their AIS signal, an automatic tracking system used on ships, only to switch it back on at a later stage of their journey, according to oil industry source, making it harder to see actual volumes.

Still, there is general agreement that crude shipments have dropped from at least 2.5 million bpd in April 2018, the month before President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the nuclear deal with Iran.

---

**Oil bulls back off as US drilling surge puts strain on rally**



Oil investors are losing faith in the crude rally, more moved by the US drilling boom than geopolitical tensions, according to Bloomberg. Money managers slashed optimistic wagers on US oil prices for the first time since February, while boosting wagers on a decline by 14%, data released on Friday show. That pushed overall sentiment to its least bullish in three weeks – just in time for the crude market to falter. After surging to start the year, West Texas Intermediate futures recorded their second straight weekly decline on Friday. Rising US crude production and stockpiles have outweighed concerns that tensions arising in Iran, Venezuela and Libya would limit global supplies.

“The market has priced in an awful lot of bullish news and if you’re going to go higher, you’re going to need some of these tail risks to turn into actual risks,” said Bill O’Grady, chief market strategist at Confluence Investment Management in St Louis. US Production hit a record 12.3mn barrels a day last week, while stockpiles reached their highest levels in more than a year as maintenance and unplanned outages slowed work at refineries.

The net-long WTI position – the difference between bets on higher prices and wagers on a drop – dropped 4.2% to 301,343

futures and options contracts in the week ended April 30, the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission said. That was the first decline in 10 weeks. Long positions fell 2.8%. By contrast, the net-long position on Brent crude continued its climb, jumping to the highest level since October. Saudi Arabia began the week by saying Opec and its allies could extend production cuts that have been propping up the global benchmark price in 2019.

---

## Russia misses Opec+ oil cuts target in April



Russia pumped more crude last month than agreed under the Opec+ deal, lagging behind Energy Minister Alexander Novak's pledge to comply with the pact. Russia produced 45.97mn tonnes of crude in April, according to preliminary data from the Energy Ministry's CDU-TEK unit. This equals 11.233mn bpd, or 185,000 barrels lower than the October daily baseline,



according to Bloomberg calculations. Novak said that April would be the first month Russia would fully comply with its pledged production cut of 228,000 barrels a day, as part of the agreement with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies. Despite missing the reduction target Russia has been accelerating the pace of cuts.

In March, the country's average daily output was 11.303mn barrels. Russia's average daily oil-output cut in April was 197,000 barrels a day, according to the government. The reduction, excluding projects operating under its production-sharing agreements, or PSAs, reached 213,000 barrels a day, the government said. By end-April the production cut had increased to 223,000 barrels a day from the October baseline, the Energy Ministry said in a separate statement citing Novak. Excluding output from PSAs, the end-April cut was 229,000 barrels a day, the government said. The Energy Ministry first mentioned PSAs when assessing the nation's production cuts in March, without clarifying why the output target should be adjusted in this way.

Over the past few months, the Energy Ministry has published its own figures for average daily production cuts, which differ from Bloomberg calculations. This may be explained by a divergence in methodology, due to the government using a different conversion ratio from tonnes to barrels for each individual field. Bloomberg calculations are based on a ratio of 7.33 barrels per tonne. Russia's crude production data comes on the day that US waivers for buyers of Iranian oil expire. Saudi Arabia pledged to adjust its production to make sure that customers remain adequately supplied. Yet the kingdom said it will co-ordinate with its allies in the producer group and will not exceed its quota under the Opec+ deal. President Vladimir Putin said last week that Russia has "the colossal potential" to increase its oil output if needed in response to global demand. Yet he reiterated the country will keep output within pledges made to its partners in Opec+.

---

# Australia iron ore exports rebound in April, but not enough



By Clyde Russell

LAUNCESTON, Australia, May 1 (Reuters) – Australia’s iron ore exports rebounded in April after being hit by a cyclone the prior month, but the surge in shipments wasn’t enough to offset declining volumes from Brazil in the wake of January’s tailings dam disaster.

Australian exports were about 69.1 million tonnes in April, according to preliminary figures compiled by Refinitiv, based on vessel-tracking and port data.

This was up 20 percent from 57.5 million tonnes in March, when shipments were disrupted by Tropical Cyclone Veronica, which closed ports and impeded mining operations in Western

Australia state.

Brazil's exports volumes have been slipping since top miner Vale was forced to close several mines in the wake of the collapse of a tailings dam at its Brumadinho mine in late January, which left more than 300 people dead or missing.

Brazilian shipments of the steel-making ingredient fell sharply to 24.9 million tonnes in February from 30.1 million tonnes in January, the last month unaffected by the dam burst.

Exports slipped again to 23.5 million tonnes in March, and fell another 20 percent to just 18.7 million tonnes in April, the lowest monthly total since Refinitiv starting compiling data in January 2015.

In the first four months of 2019, Brazilian exports were 97.2 million tonnes, down from 111.9 million in the same period in 2018.

For Australia, exports in the first four months were 259 million tonnes, down from 280 million for the same period a year earlier, hurt mainly by a 13.3 million tonne drop in March.

Taken together, the total drop from the world's top two shippers of iron ore in the first four months of 2019 is 35.7 million tonnes, a significant hit to global supply.

## **PRICE BOOM JUSTIFIED**

It's therefore little wonder that spot iron ore prices have surged, and remained at elevated levels in recent weeks.

Ore with 62 percent iron content delivered to China MT-I0-QIN62=ARG, as assessed by Argus Media, was at \$94.85 a tonne on Tuesday, the last day of April.

The price has now posted gains for five straight months, but the big kick up came in late January/early February, after the

Brazil dam disaster, when prices jumped 20 percent between Jan. 25, the day of the burst, and Feb. 11, when they closed at \$90.75 a tonne.

The Singapore Exchange futures curve has also shifted into a steeper backwardation since the Brazil dam collapse, with higher prices for prompt contracts indicating a tighter spot market.

As of the close on April 30, the front-month contract was trading at a 5 percent premium to the third month, up from a 3 percent premium the day of the Brazil incident. Like many major commodities, iron ore usually trades in backwardation.

The data on export volumes from Australia and Brazil, coupled with the price action, speaks to a sudden tightening of the market for seaborne iron ore.

What it doesn't show is how likely this is to continue.

The rebound in Australian exports in April likely shows that the cyclone disruption is over, and shipments will at least return to the recent monthly average, if not improve slightly, if the major companies are able to run their operations harder to make up for some lost ground.

The bigger question mark is Brazil, where it seems less likely that it can recover the tonnes lost so far.

Vale said on March 28 it expects to sell 75 million tonnes less iron ore and pellets this year, down 20 percent from 2018.

Given there isn't much spare capacity in Australia, or in number three exporter South Africa, it's difficult to see where these lost tonnes can be made up, other than at the margins by smaller exporters such as India and Iran, and by the use of port inventories in China.

But there are also some question marks over the strength of

demand, particularly in China, which buys about two-thirds of seaborne iron ore and produces about half of the world's steel.

China's manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) fell to 50.1 in April from March's reading of 50.5, confounding market expectations that it would hold at the prior level.

While still just above the 50-level that separates growth from contraction, the PMI doesn't provide confidence to hopes that China's economy is starting to respond to Beijing's recent stimulus moves.

It still may be the case that the economy will pick up from now on, but there is also a risk that steel demand forecasts may be too optimistic, and that iron ore demand may also moderate.