Japan’s extra US corn came through the Pacific Northwest in 2024

Matthew Daley · Research note · Updated November 18, 2026 · Data checked November 18, 2026

Matched Gulf and Pacific Northwest bulk-ship inspections for Japan show growth, not simply a transfer between ports.

Growth rather than a one for one diversion

Japan-bound corn inspections through Pacific Northwest ports increased by 6.49 million metric tons in 2024, while Gulf inspections fell by 1.88 million. The two regions’ combined volume grew 65%, from 7.10 million to 11.72 million tons. The Pacific Northwest therefore accounted for more than the net increase in this matched sample. The figures do not show that individual cargoes were diverted from the Gulf. [1]

The Pacific Northwest share rose from 20.2% in 2023 to 67.7% in 2024. But 2023 was a low starting point: the region had handled 37.5% in 2022. Showing the three years together separates the recovery from that low base from the higher level reached in 2024.

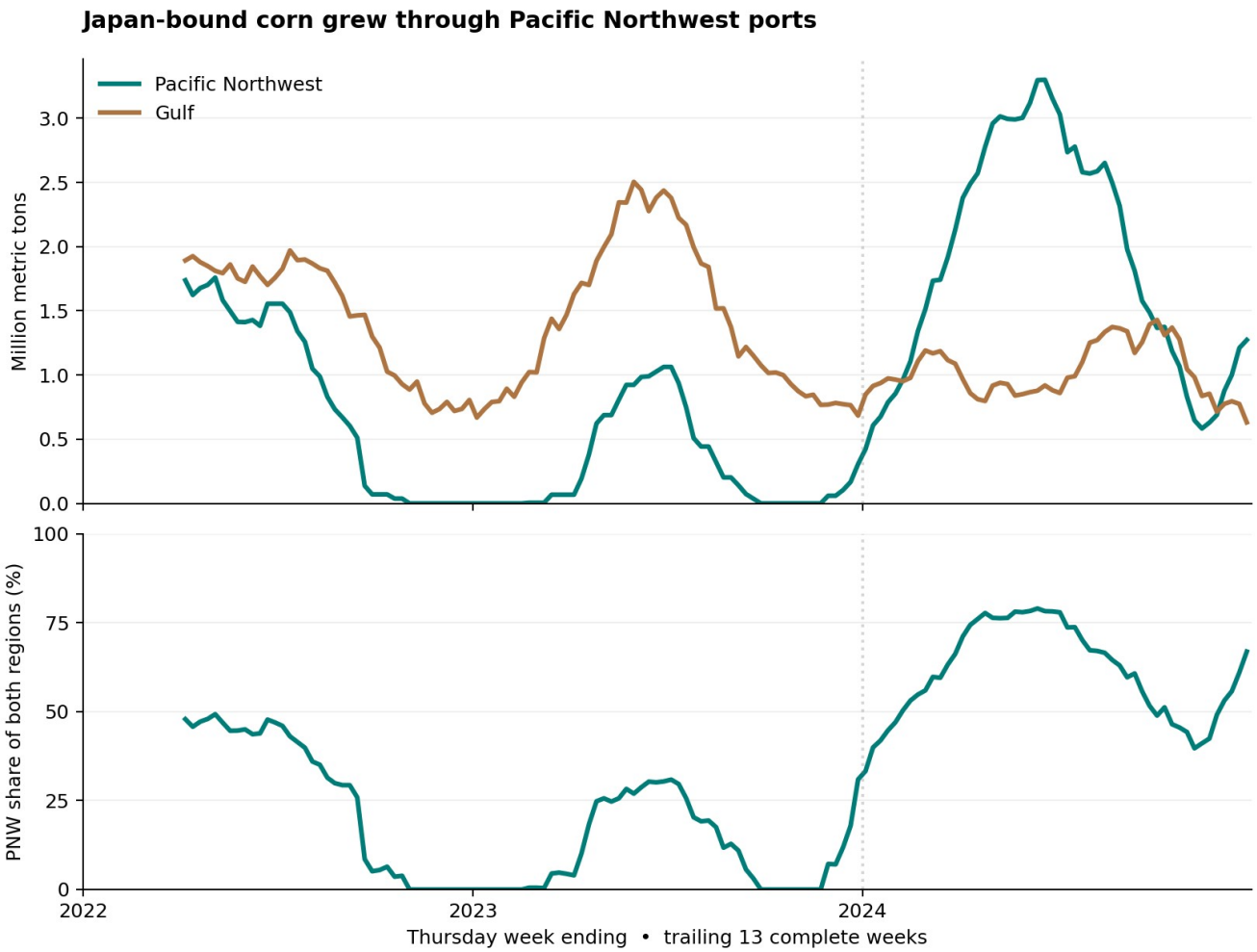
Matched weeks 2–52	Gulf Mt	PNW Mt	Combined Mt	PNW share
2022	5.60	3.36	8.96	37.5%
2023	5.67	1.44	7.10	20.2%
2024	3.79	7.93	11.72	67.7%

Mt means million metric tons. Share is PNW divided by Gulf plus PNW, not the United States’ share of Japan’s imports. The panel excludes other US ports and non-bulk or non-ship movements.

The change preceded some of the shipping disruption

The trailing 13-week series shows Pacific Northwest volumes beginning to recover in late 2023 before their much larger rise in early 2024. USDA’s contemporaneous routing evidence shows the Cape of Good Hope becoming the majority route for tracked Gulf-to-East Asia grain vessels only in December 17–30, 2023: 11 of 16 vessels headed toward the Cape, three toward Suez and two toward Panama. [2]

The chronology matters. Inspection is not the date a sale was agreed or freight booked, and the records do not link those decisions to a vessel’s eventual route. Earlier sales, supply and Japanese demand could affect later inspections. The routing report also covers multiple grains and East Asian destinations. It supplies context, not a causal test for this Japan-bound corn sample.



CEVE calculations from USDA FGIS. Trailing 13 complete weeks, April 7, 2022–December 26, 2024. Upper panel: bulk-ship corn inspection volumes for Japan. Lower panel: PNW share of the Gulf-plus-PNW total. A zero indicates no qualifying inspection record, not independently confirmed absence of shipments.

A cheaper Gulf benchmark did not reverse the port mix

USDA's Minneapolis-to-Japan transport benchmark favored the Pacific Northwest in the first quarter of 2024, but favored the Gulf in the second. Meanwhile, the Pacific Northwest share of our roughly corresponding weeks 14–26 window reached 78.2%. [1, 3]

Transportation cost per metric ton	Q1 2024	Q2 2024
Via Gulf	$136.51	$101.76
Via Pacific Northwest	$108.02	$108.95

The Gulf's first-quarter benchmark included $46.95 per ton of rail transport to St. Louis during the Upper Mississippi's winter closure; that leg was absent in the second quarter. These are quarterly benchmarks for one inland origin, not the inspected cargoes' freight bills. USDA's rail component uses base tariffs with fuel surcharges; auction and secondary-market railcar costs can differ. A single quoted corridor cost does not explain the port mix. [3]

The Pacific Northwest position persisted beyond 2024

Compatible public inspection records extend the picture. Across matched weeks 2–52 of 2025, Pacific Northwest volume reached 10.80 million metric tons and Gulf volume 4.55 million, putting the Pacific Northwest share at 70.3%.

On the shorter common weeks 2–46 comparison, the share rose from 68.4% in 2025 to 78.9% in 2026. Pacific Northwest volume increased from 9.13 million to 10.01 million tons while Gulf volume fell from 4.22 million to 2.68 million. Combined volume declined from 13.35 million to 12.69 million. Unlike the 2024 expansion, this later share increase came with a smaller combined total. The 2026 comparison ends November 12 and is not a full-year result. [1]

What this adds to the Panama research

The case connects canal conditions to the wider transport network. An alternative port can accommodate growing trade, but its share depends on inland connections, supply, demand and earlier commercial decisions as well as ocean access. The evidence documents a large change in the geography of inspected corn. It does not measure Panama's contribution, identify diverted cargoes or establish a permanent change in the route chosen by a given ship.

Data and method

We recomputed the series from USDA Federal Grain Inspection Service annual CSVs for 2022–26, downloaded November 18, 2026. Filters are grain CORN, destination JAPAN, carrier 1 (ship) and shipment BU (bulk). PNW comprises Columbia River and Puget Sound; Gulf comprises Mississippi River, East Gulf, North Texas and South Texas. We sum the reported metric tons by Thursday week-ending date. The annual table retains ISO weeks 2–52, 51 weeks per year; the current comparison retains weeks 2–46 in each year. Annual files are joined before grouping, so weeks spanning December and January are assembled consistently.

The chart uses sums of the current and previous 12 complete weeks, including week 1 where it falls within a rolling window. It is not an average of weekly shares. The first plotted window ends April 7, 2022; the last ends December 26, 2024. A zero means no qualifying record within covered weeks, not independently confirmed absence of shipments. Inspections are not sales, sailings or arrivals. These are revised historical extracts, not the information available to traders at each past date.

Sources

[1] USDA FGIS, Yearly Export Grain Totals, 2022–26 annual CSVs; CEVE calculations.
https://fgisonline.ams.usda.gov/ExportGrainReport/default.aspx

[2] USDA AMS, Grain Transportation Report, January 18, 2024, pp. 4–6.
https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/GTR01182024.pdf

[3] USDA AMS, Grain Transportation Report, September 19, 2024, pp. 4–5, Tables 1–2 and table notes.
https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/GTR09192024.pdf