

What's in rail tankers and why can't we know?

In wake of Lac-Mégantic, provincial, municipal leaders say rail safety an urgent issue

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Firefighters and emergency workers clean up at the site of the Lac-Mégantic disaster. Mayors across Canada are concerned because they cannot get timely information about what is in rail cars. (CBC)

Nearly three months after the Lac-Mégantic disaster, rail safety remains at the top of the national agenda with a meeting of federal and provincial transport ministers this week focusing on the question of what is in tanker cars and why provinces and municipalities can't get that information.

After the conclusion of the meeting in Winnipeg, Manitoba's transportation minister said the legacy of the Lac-Mégantic disaster in July must be a safer rail system across Canada.

Steve Ashton said there is an urgent need to look comprehensively at rail safety at a time when more oil is being shipped by rail and the Lac-Mégantic disaster is fresh in the public mind.

- [What's in those rail tankers?](#)
- [Safety rules lag as oil transport by train rises](#)

"We all agreed we must have a legacy out of that event and the 47 people that died and make sure that never ever happens again," he said in an interview with CBC's *The Current*.

The [provincial ministers pressed federal minister Lisa Raitt](#) to allow provinces and municipalities to access information about what is being shipped.

"A number of things are coming out of what happened in Lac-Mégantic – the suitability of some of the rail cars used to transport hazardous material, the situation for short lines in terms of rail safety standards," Ashton said.

"Even in terms of liability, how the short line in Lac-Mégantic had a liability of \$25 million – nothing compared to the devastating impact and the huge cost on the community."

- [TIMELINE: Lac-Mégantic rail disaster](#)
- [Faces of the Lac-Mégantic tragedy](#)

Raitt left the meeting without talking to reporters and refused to commit to any changes. A Transportation Safety Board report into the disaster is expected to make further recommendations.

Even as the ministers were gathered in Winnipeg, 17 Canadian National rail cars — some carrying flammable petroleum, ethanol and chemicals — came off the tracks near the village of Landis, west of Saskatoon.

That accident was an echo of two earlier this year in Calgary, where a **frustrated Mayor Naheed Nenshi castigated** rail companies and federal authorities for not allowing the city to know what is in rail cars, even as fire and emergency departments were trying to deal with the cleanup.

"I don't understand why the railroad has so much trouble understanding what it is they are shipping and or telling people what it is they are shipping," Nenshi said.

"Once again it was city staff who has no regulatory authority on this -risking their lives to solve the problem. And we can't solve the problem if we aren't given accurate information at the beginning."

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities backed up Nenshi's call for timely information, pointing out that municipalities are on the frontline in rail accidents, but currently have no right to information.

Keith Stewart, a climate and energy campaign coordinator for Greenpeace, says there is resistance by the shippers about releasing that information.

"One of the reasons they don't want to give that information out is because we are seeing a huge increase in the amount of oil and other petrochemical products moving by rail in this country and I think they're hoping no one's going to notice that or pay too much attention," he told *The Current*.

He said rail companies may be unaware of what is on their trains as the tanker cars are owned by shipping or petroleum companies.

The U.S. began a probe of the mislabelling of tanker cars this spring and that investigation was given impetus by the Lac-Mégantic disaster. There have been reports the crude shipped on the MMA railway **was more explosive than was suggested by its labelling.**

The TSB been warning since 1994 about the kind of tanker cars used to transport crude oil, Stewart said.

"It was saying we know these things are not safe. They tend to rupture easily in a derailment and yet transport of hazardous goods continues in them," he said.

However, the federal government has not changed the rules to demand stronger, safer rail cars despite repeated recommendations from the TSB.

David Jeans, president of citizen advocacy group Transport Action Canada, says there has not been such a focus on rail safety in Canada since the 1979 Mississauga, Ont., derailment. He said Canadians believe it is an urgent issue.

Jeans said the problem of municipalities not being given information should be addressed right away in any new federal rules -- as modern technology makes it possible for rail companies to know what is on their trains.

"The railways do track everything that's on their trains, have extensive computer systems that know right down to the car what's being transported on each train and so they should be able to respond to the needs of the provincial and municipal governments and the fire departments quickly whenever an accident happens. I think something needs to be done to speed up that process.