

Towns demand ban on single-hulled rail tankers

Canadian, U.S. municipalities join to lobby for stronger laws

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Published: 2:01 am March 12, 2014

A coalition of U.S. and Canadian municipalities is demanding their governments outlaw the type of oil-laden tank cars that blew up July 7 in Lac-Mégantic, Que., killing 47 people, destroying the downtown and contaminating the lake and the entire centre of the town.

The tank cars, known as DOT-111s, are old-line tankers with single-wall, thinsteel bodies that are known to rupture in an accident. They are being used to transport

Bakken crude oil, which is among the most volatile of crudes with a boiling point of just 29 to 30 degrees Celsius and a flammability near that of gasoline.

As hot weather approaches and the use of these cars remains high, there is rising concern among municipal leaders that this summer could bring more tragedies like the one in Lac-Mégantic, Karen Darch, co-chair of an Illinois municipal coalition called TRAC, said Tuesday at a news conference at the Canadian Embassy.

"We once again urge regulators to take a hard line by forbidding the use of the DOT-111 in the transportation of Bakken crude," she said.

Darch is part of a group of Canadian and U.S. municipal leaders visiting the U.S. capital to lobby lawmakers and regulators to strengthen laws and safety regulations for rail shipment of hazardous materials.

The recent surge in tanker train accidents - with 10 of them in the last 12 months, and more oil spilled in 2012 than in all the years from 1975 to 2011 combined - coincides with the marked rise in shipping oil by rail. Trains hauled more than 400,000 carloads of crude last year, compared with 9,500 in 2008, says the Association of American Railroads. In Canada, the tank-car fleet has grown to 160,000 from 500 in 2009.

Rail companies say rising demand forces them to use aging single-hulled cars and there's an 18-month backlog on building safer types.

The increased demand comes primarily because new oilfields like the Bakken don't have sufficient access to pipelines. About two-thirds of Bakken oil is shipped by rail.

Canada is citing the dangers posed by trains to argue for the Keystone XL pipeline, which is designed to transport Alberta and Bakken crude to Texas refineries on the Gulf Coast. Some members of the municipal coalition said they favour pipelines over rail, but others said they are taking no position on the issue because, pipeline or not, oil will continue to move by rail and they want to concentrate on that issue.

The coalition is also calling on Canadian and U.S. governments to force the oil and train industries to create a multibillion-dollar fund to pay for cleanups.

Currently, the liability of large railways is limited to \$1.5 billion - not enough to clean up the Lac-Mégantic spill and rebuild the town, the mayors said.