

Transport Canada proposes new tank-car standards after fiery derailments

ERIC ATKINS AND KIM MACKRAEL TORONTO and OTTAWA — The Globe and Mail

Last updated Thursday, Mar. 12 2015, 5:37 AM EDT

Ottawa is proposing long-awaited new standards for rail cars carrying crude oil in a bid to limit a rash of fiery derailments across the country.

Transport Canada unveiled a proposal Wednesday that would require tank cars used to haul crude oil and other flammable goods to meet new standards that include thicker steel, thermal protection, full shields at each end and more protection over the valves by 2025 at the latest. The changes are meant to help the cars better withstand a derailment and collision while limiting the amount of crude that can spill and ignite.

After the 2013 tragedy in Lac Mégantic, Que., which killed 47 people, Ottawa ordered 5,000 of the least crash-resistant tank cars off the rails, increased train inspections and ordered trains hauling dangerous goods to slow down.

In addition, the government required the industry to begin phasing out older-model DOT-111 tank cars – such as those involved in the Lac-Mégantic disaster – and replace them with the comparatively stronger CPC-1232 model.

The latest proposal, announced Wednesday, would require shippers to upgrade the tank cars once again, this time replacing the CPC-1232 cars with yet another standard, which the government is calling TC-117. The latest standard would apply to all trains hauling flammable goods, including crude oil, by 2025.

In a note posted to its website, Transport Canada noted that it also plans to introduce new braking requirements for some trains. No braking rules were included in Wednesday's proposal for upgraded tank cars.

Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific Railway said on Wednesday that they welcomed the new proposal, and the Railway Association of Canada said the tougher standards will make it safer to move dangerous goods by rail.

The rail industry is smarting from unwanted public scrutiny in the wake of train derailments, the latest of which happened on Saturday near Gogama, Ont., when a CN train carrying Alberta crude to Lévis, Que., derailed and caught fire.

Railways do not own the cars they haul, but are liable for the damages that occur in a derailment. For this reason, the industry has been pushing for tank cars that are less likely to rupture and catch fire in a derailment. The industry also welcomed Ottawa's recent proposal to make shippers of oil pay fees that would help cover the costs of a cleanup after a crash.

Mark Winfield, an environmental studies professor at York University, said the new proposal is a good step forward, but that it won't prevent future crude-by-rail disasters on its own. "It's only a piece of the puzzle," he said.

Prof. Winfield said Transport Canada should look at the speed and length of oil trains and whether it's possible to route the trains in a manner that avoids major cities, among other concerns. He also pointed out that it will be another 10 years before the proposed new tank-car standard comes into effect.

"You can build as many hulls around the tank cars as you like," Prof. Winfield added. "The designer of the Titanic knows that isn't going to work in all cases."