

Faulty cars ride Canada's rails: TSB

Agency warns of potential disaster from dangerous goods on trains

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Disasters like the Wabamun train wreck five years ago could happen again because "tens of thousands" of defective railway cars might be riding Canada's railroads, the Transportation Safety Board says.

The August 2005 CN derailment spilled 800,000 litres of heavy fuel oil and pole-treating oil in and around the lake.

The railway was fined \$1.4 million last year for that disaster, blamed on a faulty connecting piece known as a stub sill.

The TSB released a report Wednesday regarding a 2009 incident in Dugald, Man., in which a CN Rail car carrying 23,360 kilograms of flammable liquid propylene separated from the rest of the train due to a stub-sill failure.

In May 2009, a car carrying chlorine at a chemical plant in Becancour, Que., separated before the train departed.

The report noted that while the train didn't derail, the same stub sill is a part of "approximately 41,000 cars within the North American tank car fleet ... and approximately 35,000 of them are in dangerous goods service," said Rob Johnston, the TSB's acting rail director of investigations.

The 41,000 rail cars, which make up 13 per cent of the estimated 325,000 in service in North America, were manufactured by the Chicagobased Union Tank Car Company. Of the 58 instances of cracked stub sills between 2004 and 2009, 25 were made by UTLX; all eight broken stub sills found in Canada were made by UTLX.

The TSB said there aren't any requirements under the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act "to record and report stub-sill failures," which "may prevent other broken parts from being found before the next accident."

The report recommended Transport Canada, which regulates rail travel in this country, and the railway industry to make a "concerted effort" to raise safety standards.

A Transport Canada spokeswoman said in an e-mail that the department would respond officially to the recommendations within 90 days, as mandated by the Canadian Transportation Accident and Investigation Safety Board Act.

Melanie Quesnel wrote that in January, the department "initiated a targeted inspection program for these tank cars and has an ongoing investigation to verify that the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act and its associated regulations and standards were followed."

To date, 2,542 of the UTLX cars have been inspected, four of which were found to require further evaluation.

The department and its American equivalent, the Federal Railroad Administration, urged UTLX to "accelerate their established tank re-welding program where tank cars will be prioritized by age, mileage and use."

CN Rail spokesman Warren Chandler said his company welcomed the TSB's suggestions to bolster rail safety, which he called "a North American industry issue" that "is going to require the full co-operation of regulators, industry, and car-owners in Canada and the United States."

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