

Railway lacking dangerous goods info

CN Rail not equipped to provide dangerous goods details

By: [Stu Salkeld](#) St. Albert Gazette
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Many local residents may be watching the television coverage of burning train cars in Eastern Canada, and wondering ... could that happen here?

The Gazette contacted multiple sources in business and the federal government trying to find out what dangerous goods, if any, were passing through this community. CN Rail declined to answer.

When contacted by the Gazette, CN Rail spokesperson Warren Chandler said Jan. 8 dangerous goods information for St. Albert trains was not available.

"I do not have that information readily available," Chandler stated in an email.

"CN can move any commodity at anytime on our network in response to customer demand.

"CN operates two trains per day through St. Albert, one heading north out of Edmonton, and one coming south into Edmonton. CN does not keep records of how many trains per day we run so it would not be possible to give you that figure from 20 years ago. However I would say that it would not be possible to have run any less trains."

There are two rail lines that either run through or next to St. Albert – one on the west side of town and another that skirts the edge of Campbell Business Park.

Anyone wanting to know the exact number of trains, and what's on them, will have to get that information from CN Rail, said Transport Canada spokesperson Brian Williams on Jan. 10.

He noted, however, that a Transport Canada directive issued last November requires the sharing of dangerous goods information with municipalities, if not the general public.

"Transport Canada issued a protective direction, November 20, 2013 requiring rail companies to share information with municipalities," stated Williams.

"Transport Canada requires that any Canadian Class 1 railway company that transports dangerous goods must provide municipalities with yearly aggregate information, presented by quarter, on the nature and volume of dangerous goods the company transports by rail through that municipality."

Mayor Nolan Crouse said the City of St. Albert is looking for similar information from CN Rail. The city sent a letter Jan. 3 to CN president and CEO Claude Mongeau looking for the state of bridge crossings, Crouse said.

“This is to request that the City of St. Albert receive a report on the current state of the CN infrastructure within our community,” stated the city letter.

“What I am seeking, on behalf of council and our community, is to receive the latest inspection summaries of the condition of the railway within the city limits of St. Albert, as well as the significant trestle infrastructure.”

Plans for major or ongoing maintenance are also requested.

“If we are not able to obtain same from CN directly, I understand that this is available from Transport Canada and as such, ask that you please assist me in obtaining the appropriate contact information, so that the records can be obtained.”

Crouse noted the city hasn't received a response as of Monday but “CN has committed to follow up on the status and get back to me on the status of a response to my letter.”

St. Albert MP Brent Rathgeber said the changes dating back to November are the federal government's response to a Federation of Canadian Municipalities request for more information about dangerous goods.

The more substantive problem facing Transport Minister Lisa Raitt is trying to accommodate the FCM's request for “real-time” information; municipalities could then instantly know what dangerous goods are being transported through local jurisdictions, Rathgeber said.

He said the system could be cumbersome for the rail lines, “but not overwhelmingly so.”

As illustrated by the Lac Megantic disaster, which occurred at 10 p.m. on a Friday night, train derailments don't phone ahead or make an appointment, Rathgeber said. So it can make be difficult for first responders to get information about what dangerous goods are involved in a derailment. The real-time requirement would address that, Rathgeber said.

“So if there is a spill, they know instantly what kind of situation they're dealing with,” said Rathgeber.

Rathgeber said Transport Canada has known for six to eight years that dangerous goods regulations needed to be modernized. The MP, who represents an area including CN's main line down by Yellowhead Trail, said pipelines for oil and gas are jammed, so more and more petroleum product is being shipped by rail.

Trains are getting longer and longer, and are carrying more than wheat and lumber. Aging infrastructure and train cars complicate the situation, he said.

With the recent fiery derailments, Rathgeber predicted that Parliament will be discussing this issue when it resumes sitting Jan. 28.