

# Rail Safety Debate Back On The Front Burner As Senate To Hold Hearing Amid Rash Of Accidents

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Following a year of several high-profile rail crashes that highlighted the aging U.S. commuter rail infrastructure and the growing demand to use the rails to transport highly flammable oil and natural gas, a Senate Commerce subcommittee will meet Thursday to discuss current rail safety regulations and how to prevent more accidents.

The hearing follows a [Feb. 26 House hearing](#) on rail safety at which federal regulator Cynthia Quarterman said the current rail safety rules could not be finalized until at least June.

The issue is doubly sensitive as the fate of the railroad industry is set to be directly influenced by an upcoming decision from President Obama about whether to build the Keystone XL Pipeline to bring Canadian and U.S. crude to the Gulf Coast for refining.

Pipeline proponents argue it would be safer and cleaner to ship the crude via pipeline rather than in trucks or trains.

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Only 0.0023 percent of hazardous material carloads spill or crash, according to the Association of American Railroads and the American Shortline and Regional Railroad Association, but industry leaders and regulators aim for zero crashes.

Safety advocates have called for increased regulations after a train carrying oil derailed and exploded in December in North Dakota, spilling 400,000 gallons of crude, and a New York Metro-North commuter train crashed in November, killing four people and injuring more than 60.

Later, a train carrying Bakken oil crashed and killed more than 40 people in Quebec last summer. Last month, a train carrying Canadian oil derailed and spilled in Pennsylvania, with no reports of injuries.

Late last month an emergency order from the U.S. Department of Transportation requiring shippers to test all crude before it moves by rail [threatened to slow Bakken crude deliveries](#). As much as 800,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude is shipped by rail. But industry leaders at the Feb. 26 meeting said companies didn't fully understand the rules to comply with them.

The Senate [hearing](#) before the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety and Security of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation will begin at 11 a.m. EST and webcast live [here](#). The senators will hear from six witnesses across industry groups and government agencies.

Those witnesses include: Quarterman, administrator of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration; Christopher Hart, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board; Geoffrey Blackwell, chief of the Office of Native Affairs and Policy at the Federal Communications Commission; Bob Greco, group director of the downstream and industry operations at the American Petroleum Institute; and Ed Hamberger, president and CEO of the Association of American Railroads.

The specifics of those rules, as well as proposed adjustments such as a different specification for tank cars, will likely be discussed at Thursday's hearing.