

Rail safety improvements welcomed in Windsor

Dangerous materials and tank safety worries politicians and emergency services

CBC News Updated: Apr 01, 2014 5:05 PM ET

New regulations go into effect Tuesday that require rail companies to report what types of hazardous materials are moving through cities such as Windsor.

The reports will only be shared with first responders, and are only required every four months, which worries Warren Cosford. He lives by train tracks in Windsor near Remington Park.

Cosford doesn't believe rail cars should be allowed to carry crude oil from North Dakota through Windsor.

"Here we have oil tanker cars that are not designed to carry petroleum, and they're rolling past my house," he said.

According to CBC sources, 80 to 120 oil tank cars move through Windsor every day. They carry a total of approximately 12 million litres of oil.

Windsor councillor Jo-Anne Gignac and fire chief Bruce Montone think rail companies need to provide daily information on what is travelling through our city.

'We have oil tanker cars that are not designed to carry petroleum, and they're rolling past my house.' - Warren Cosford, Windsor resident

"When we have communications that are almost instant, it's beyond me why we can't have a current reading of what's passing through the city," said Gignac. "When the goods leave the manufacturer, whatever dangerous goods we're talking about, they notify the municipalities in the approximate time that will be passing through them."

Gignac said she understands there are security issues associated with making the information public. She agrees that there may be people who would take advantage of that knowledge, but she said it can only help a city prepare if Windsor's emergency coordinator knows ahead of time.

Bruce Montone, the city's fire chief and emergency coordinator, is the point person with whom Transport Canada will liaise.

"This is a wonderful first step to know after the fact what is transported through the community," he said. "But even better information would be to know in advance."

CP rail spokesperson Ed Greenberg said he doesn't know if that will happen.

He does say companies will provide any information to first responders if requested.

"With the ongoing dialogue that we have with local first responders and the ongoing training and education sessions, if there is ever an incident, that information flows very quickly and from various sources," said Greenberg.

Cargo containers in question

Fred Millar, a railway consultant from the Washington, D.C. area., said it's not just the cargo, but the containers that ship them that could be dangerous.

"These cargoes are so volatile that the rail cars are not meant to carry these cargoes. They don't hold their cargo in the case of any kind of collision or derailment," he said.

Conservative Essex MP Jeff Watson said the federal government has been working toward improving the tank cars.

'...thicker steel, tougher protection along the tops and ends of the car...' - Essex

MP Jeff Watson on new rail safety policy changes

"The rules that we've formalized are additional protection ... thicker steel, tougher protection along the tops and ends of the car to ensure we have cars that are being produced at the toughest standard possible for removing whatever risk we can from the normal transport of these products from across the country," said Watson.

He told CBC News that if there are changes to the transport, including new substances or volumes of those substances, municipalities will be notified.

A parliamentary committee continues hearings Tuesday in Ottawa in an effort to better improve rail safety.

TSB recommendations

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada renewed its call on Tuesday for the speedy phase-out of older oil-by-rail cars in light of last summer's inferno that killed 47 people in an oil train explosion in the Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic.

"A long and gradual phase-out of older-model cars simply isn't good enough," Transportation Safety Board Chair Wendy

Tadros told a House of Commons committee examining whether Canada's safety is adequate as much more oil is sent by rail.

This echoed remarks she made on Jan. 23 when her agency and the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board made initial recommendations stemming from the Lac-Mégantic crash and other oil-by-rail accidents.

Regulators are focusing on DOT-111 tanker cars which are used to carry oil. New DOT-111s are being built to safer standards but the question is what to do with the large number of older ones. Tadros said all the cars in the Lac-Mégantic disaster were older.

Transport Minister Lisa Raitt has 90 days, until April 23, to respond to the Transportation Safety Board's recommendations.

Canadian policymakers want to see safety standards implemented jointly with the United States because tanker cars travel back and forth across the U.S. border.

Raitt said in early January that the two countries would introduce new safety standards "fairly soon".