

Off the rails: B.C. train derailments jump 20 per cent to five-year high (with map and chart)

A total of 110 incidents in 2013 marked a five-year high, according to the Transportation Safety Board

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 24, 2014

Train derailments increased 20 per cent to 110 incidents in B.C. in 2013 — the highest level in five years — according to federal Transportation Safety Board documents provided to *The Vancouver Sun*.

The two biggest derailments involved CN trains — 12 sulphur-carrying cars near Chetwynd on May 15, and 15 ore-carrying cars near Tumbler Ridge on Aug. 1 — and the largest liquid spill Jan. 30 involved more than 3,000 litres from the punctured fuel tank of a CN locomotive in Prince George yard.

On Aug 12, 2013, near Spences Bridge, a loaded CP coal train reported a car was found derailed upright along with “track damage and fires along the right of way between Mile 76 and Mile 81.”

And on Dec. 21 in Metro Vancouver, a CP Rail train crew “while lifting cars from track ... at the Chevron facility” reported derailing a tank car over the end of track. No dangerous goods were involved, and no one was injured.

The vast majority of derailments occur in rail yards or remote stretches of track far from the public eye and go largely unreported by the news media. But the railways are required to report such occurrences to federal authorities.

The increase in derailments in B.C. in 2013 occurred during a year in which railway safety — especially involving the movement of oil products — captured the headlines and gained the attention of the federal government.

The most serious national accident occurred July 6, 2013, when a runaway train of 72 tank cars loaded with crude oil crashed in Lac-Mégantic, Que., killing 47 people and destroying half the downtown area. The train was owned by Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway.

On Wednesday, Transport Minister Lisa Raitt in Ottawa announced regulations tightening safety on Canada’s railways, including the removal of older tank cars considered at greater risk of exploding in an accident as well as new rules covering speed limits, route assessments and emergency response plans. About 5,000 of the most dangerous DOT-111

tankers are to be removed from Canadian railways within 30 days. Another 65,000 must be removed or retrofitted within three years.

Belcarra Mayor Ralph Drew is a member of Metro Vancouver's transportation committee and an intervener at the forthcoming National Energy Board hearings into the Kinder Morgan plan to twin its pipeline, which would result in a seven-fold increase in tanker traffic through Burrard Inlet.

Drew said Thursday the increase in derailments is worrying, especially given a spike in shipments of oil by rail through B.C.'s mountainous geography. Transport Canada has estimated almost 1,200 carloads of crude oil and petroleum products were sent to B.C. in 2012, up from fewer than 50 in 2011, but has so far not released 2013 figures.

While not backing Kinder Morgan — "I have to be convinced they're doing it right" — Drew said he believes pipelines are a safer way to ship oil than rail. "A derailment of oil tank cars in the Fraser Canyon would be catastrophic. It would move down the whole length; mind-boggling, actually. It makes a tanker spill at sea minor in comparison with the linear damage along the river, and it would ultimately end up in the Fraser River estuary, which is critical salmon rearing grounds."

Of the federal changes, Drew said: "It's good news but long overdue. It should have happened years ago."

Other B.C. derailments last year involved shipments as diverse as wood chips, lumber, sulphur, sulphur dioxide, sulphuric acid, sodium and grain.

The 110 derailments in 2013 compare with 91 in 2012, 99 in 2011, 100 in 2010 and 94 in 2009. CN was involved in 57 of those derailments, CP in 50 and British Columbia Railway in three.

CP spokesman Ed Greenberg said the derailment at the Chevron facility involved an empty tank car but he could not say whether it had been used to transport crude oil to the Burnaby refinery.

He noted that the total derailments in B.C. also involve fairly minor incidents on side tracks and at low speeds. "Each year, CP safely moves millions of carloads of freight across North America. Safety is the highest priority in our company."

CN spokeswoman Emily Hamer said the company would not comment until Friday.

Derailments can have serious and tragic consequences, depending on where they occur and the products being transported.

In the worst case in recent history in B.C., caustic soda, or sodium hydroxide, killed more than 500,000 adult and young salmon, steelhead, trout, lamprey and other species in a CN derailment at the Cheakamus River north of Squamish in 2005. An estimated 40,000 litres of a solution containing 70-per-cent caustic soda spilled into the river. Much of the ecosystem has since returned to life.

Oil-filled rail cars bound for a transloading facility in Langley — and eventually the Chevron refinery in Burnaby — were part of a CN train that crashed and burned Oct. 19, 2013, in the hamlet of Gainford, Alta., about 85 kilometres west of Edmonton. Of 134 rail cars in the train, four carried crude oil and nine carried liquefied petroleum gas derailed, sparking a dramatic explosion. No one was injured, but homes to about 100 people in the area were evacuated.

CP moved about 13,000 carloads of crude oil in 2011, 53,500 carloads in 2012, and 90,000 in 2013, most of it shipped to the Gulf Coast and U.S. northeast.

In comparison, CN moved about 5,000 carloads of crude oil (heavy crude, light crude and pure bitumen) in 2011, increasing to more than 30,000 carloads in 2012, and reaching 75,000 in 2013.

With files from Chad Skelton