

Rail accidents involving dangerous goods on the rise one year after Lac-Megantic disaster

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Last Updated Sunday, July 6, 2014 3:15PM EDT

In the wake of the devastating Lac-Megantic train derailment, the federal government was quick to roll out a series of changes aimed at making Canada's railways safer.

As the country marks the one-year anniversary of the derailment that left 47 people dead and incinerated much of the small Quebec town's centre, Canadian railway safety data shows that accidents involving dangerous goods actually increased in 2014 from one year earlier.

According to the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, there were 74 instances of railway accidents involving dangerous goods from January to May 2014, compared to 61 from January to May 2013. During those same time periods, non-main-track derailments increased from 38 to 49.

The number of non-main-track train derailments involving one or two cars hit 224 in 2014, up from 177 in 2013.

Dangerous goods can include materials such as crude oil, diesel fuel, chemicals, explosives and radioactive material.

The July 2013 catastrophe was set off when an unmanned runaway tanker train loaded with crude oil crashed and exploded in the heart of Lac-Megantic. The train picked up speed while descending downhill and derailed on a curve, setting off a series of explosions.

The train was travelling at 104.6 km/h before the impact, which caused 63 oil-filled tanker cars to derail and released 5.98 million litres of crude oil into the environment.

Transport Action Canada President Harry Gow said the derailment – the deadliest rail accident in Canada in the past century – was a wake-up call for the federal government.

"To some extent this was a deathbed repentance by the Ministry of Transportation because the Transportation Safety Board had for years been after Transport Canada to tighten up its rules, to appoint more inspectors, and to do more work on safety," Gow told CTV News Channel on Sunday.

Transport Canada announced new rail and dangerous goods requirements late last month aimed at safeguarding communities along railway lines.

Some of the changes included requiring new DOT-111 tank cars -- the same cars involved in the Lac-Megantic crash -- to have thicker steel walls to reduce the risk of spills on impact.

The agency also set out new rules requiring railway companies to develop safety management systems and improve data reporting so safety risks can be identified before accidents happen.

After the derailment, a number of municipalities called on Ottawa to do more to reduce safety risks to communities.

However, Gow said some of the changes called for are not possible.

"Routing oil trains away from populated areas is no longer possible in most cases because the alternative routes have been ripped up," he said. "When Lac-Mégantic was built up, there was no idea that volatile crude oil would be running through the town. So everyone built right up to the tracks. That was standard in those days."

He said installing bypasses away from populated areas would be too expensive of an undertaking.

Gow said some of the most important changes that came out of the disaster were:

- The realization that crude oil is dangerous and volatile. "More so than the stuff coming out of the tarsands," he said.
- The requirement to test and label tank cars to the degree of volatility before they leave the oil fields.
- The 2017 deadline on tank car owners to either retrofit or withdraw DOT-111 cars that are not up to the new standard.
- A report calling for compulsory railway insurance.

In the aftermath of the deadly derailment, the Transportation Safety Board issued a number of recommendations aimed at improving rail safety, including prohibiting the one-person operation of trains carrying dangerous goods, and beefing up rules around parking trains carrying this type of cargo.

Transport Canada responded to the TSP recommendations, announcing in April that rail shippers would be required to develop emergency response plans for higher risk flammable liquids. The agency also announced new requirements that would force companies to immediately slow trains transporting dangerous goods.

Transport Canada was unavailable to comment on the increase in accidents involving dangerous goods before CTVNews.ca's deadline.