

U.S. proposes tougher rail tank car rules

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Thousands of older rail tank cars that carry crude oil would be phased out within two years under U.S. regulations proposed Wednesday in response to a series of fiery train crashes over the past year, including a runaway oil train that exploded in the Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic. Accident investigators have complained for decades that the cars are too easily punctured or ruptured, spilling their contents, when derailed.

The phase-in period for replacing or retrofitting the DOT-111 tank cars is shorter than the Canadian government's three-year phased plan. However, regulators left open the question of what kind of tank car will replace the old ones, saying they will choose later from among several proposals.

Besides oil, the proposed regulations would also apply to the transport of ethanol and other hazardous liquids. The regulations apply only to trains of 20 or more cars, which would include most oil shipments. The proposal also makes mandatory a 40 m.p.h. (64 km/h) speed limit through urban areas that freight railroads had voluntarily agreed to earlier this year. Tank cars have ruptured in several accidents at speeds as low as 24 m.p.h. (38 km/h). Regulators said they're considering lowering the speed limit to 30 m.p.h. (48 km/h) for some trains that aren't equipped with more advanced braking systems.

The industry is lobbying to keep the speed limit at 40 m.p.h. Railroad officials said a 30 m.p.h. speed limit would tie up traffic across the country because other freight wouldn't be able to get past slower oil trains, which are often 100 cars or longer.