

Lisa Raitt says Gogama train derailments raise questions about CN operations

Train in northern Ontario derailment was carrying Alberta crude to Eastern Canada

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Transport Minister Lisa Raitt says she's made her concerns known to CN Rail after two derailments near the community of Gogama, Ont., where crews were still working Monday to put out fires and clear debris following the most recent derailment on Saturday.

CN Rail said Monday that it was working with Gogama and Mattagami First Nations officials, as well as provincial and federal investigatory and regulatory officials after the derailment of 38 cars on a 94-car train. The derailment site is about 110 kilometres southwest of Timmins.

"Fire suppression efforts progressing well as cars cleared from derailment site, which also facilitates ongoing construction of temp bypass," the company said on Twitter Monday evening.

Saturday's derailment comes not long after the [derailment of a CN train in the Gogama area in February](#).

"We need to have the Transportation Safety Board tell us what happened there," Raitt told CBC News on Monday.

The transport minister said she's asked CN about inspections and its activity in the area.

She said the company has been co-operating with investigators as they try to determine what happened, but said the recent derailments raise questions.

"It does make you think and it makes you wonder ... operationally, that they have to make sure what they're doing is exactly correct," she said.

"That's a lot of cars and that's too many derailments, in my opinion, in a short period of time."

The railway said earlier in the day that no air and water quality issues have been identified following Saturday's incident, and containment booms remain in place downstream of the derailment site.

The Transportation Safety Board has sent investigators to the site of the derailment and oil spill, which is only 37 kilometres from the location of a derailment last month.

'They could feel it in their chests'

Meanwhile, debate has been renewed over whether rail is a safe way of transporting crude oil. The cars in Saturday's derailment were all carrying Alberta crude to Eastern Canada.

First Nations and environmentalists are among those expressing alarm.

Chief Walter Naveau of the Mattagami First Nation said his community no longer feels safe after the third CN derailment in northern Ontario in less than a month. There are concerns over the effects of smoke inhalation and environmental damage, he said.

"People in the community were feeling the effects of the toxins in the air — respiratory problems, they could feel it in their chests and their breathing," Naveau said in a phone interview.

CN said residents would likely see smoke rising from the derailment site, but insisted it posed no threat to people or the environment.

"They may say those things, but why should I trust them?" asked Naveau, adding his community is also concerned that the river flows into the community's main spawning grounds for fish, in addition to habitat for other wildlife.

Even though CN said it's taking action to contain any spilled oil and stop it from spreading into the river system, "anywhere you're going to see a major spill of oil and chemicals onto the ground you're going to see permanent contamination of the ecosystem nearby," said Adam Scott, climate and energy program manager for Environmental Defence, a non-profit, non-partisan environmental group.

"They almost never are able to clean up all of the oil released in a spill like this, and it's much worse even when there's a direct spill into a river because the oil gets moved down the river and the chemicals can spread," Scott said.

'Something dramatic' required

Last month, a CN freight train derailed in the same area — 29 cars loaded with crude oil and petroleum distillates ran off the tracks and caused a fire.

CN said the cars involved in Saturday's derailment had enhanced shielding and harder steel in accordance with new, improved safety standards.

The TSB said last month the Class 111 tank cars involved in the previous derailment also met the upgraded standards, but still "performed similarly" to those involved in the devastating train wreck in Lac-Mégantic, Que., two years ago, which predated the changes.

The TSB said last month's incident demonstrated "the inadequacy" of the new standards and urged Transport Canada to quickly beef up protection standards.

Transport Canada said it is working with the U.S. to develop new, "more robust" safety standards for tank cars used to transport flammable liquids.

Liberal MPP Glenn Thibeault, who represents the riding of Sudbury, located about 190 kilometres south of Gogama, said Saturday's incident clearly shows that the federal government must do more to strengthen rail safety regulations.

"The cars involved in this incident are new models, compliant with the latest federal regulations, yet they still failed to prevent this incident," he said.

Ontario Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca said in a statement that the derailment was "very concerning" and that he would be raising the matter with Raitt and the railways.

Scott noted an incident like this one is "basically guaranteed to happen again."

"This is not an isolated incident, we've seen several of these kinds of derailments in a month now," Scott said.

"So until something dramatic is done, we're going to see this continuing over and over again."

The NDP's France Gélinas, who represents Gogama and other Nickel Belt communities in the Ontario legislature, said the recent derailments have shaken the area and made residents "nervous" about the railway they depend on for transportation.

"For the people of Gogama, it was a very close one," she said of Saturday's derailment.

"They all said, 'What if it had been two kilometres this way, we wouldn't be there [anymore],'" she said.

"This is a what-if that will be hard for a lot of people to forget and we need to have substantive changes so that people in Gogama and throughout the northeast can feel safe again."