

Gogama derailment shows feds need to act on train safety, MPPs say

March 8, 2015 Investor Central

As crews continued to tackle a fire Sunday set off after 35 CN Rail cars carrying oil went off the tracks just outside of Gogama, Ont., the province's transportation minister and his caucus colleague went after the federal government for its rail safety record.

"The federal government, responsible for rail safety, must do more to protect our communities and the environment," tweeted Glenn Thibeault, Liberal MPP for Sudbury and parliamentary assistant to Ontario's environment minister. "The rail cars involved are new models, compliant with the latest federal regulations. Yet they still failed to prevent this incident," Thibeault said in a statement.

CN Rail has confirmed that five of the 35 tanker cars that derailed are in Makami River, which is part of the Mattagami River System. The train was 94 cars long and all were tanker cars carrying crude oil from Alberta.

Firefighters are working to control the flames and smoke from the burning oil tankers, about four kilometres outside of Gogama.

This is the third CN derailment in northern Ontario in less than a month, and the second in the same area. Crews are still working to clean up a similarly fiery derailment near the community just three weeks ago.

That prompted Ontario Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca to say in a statement Sunday that he "will be contacting Federal Transport Minister Lisa Raitt, CN and CP this week to reiterate our government's serious concerns with respect to ensuring our railways are safe."

Raitt responded with a statement saying she is "very concerned" with the spate of accidents. "Should non-compliances be found, the company will face the full force of the law," she said.

There's no sign that drinking water or air quality near the site of the train derailment have been affected, according to CN Rail's latest update Sunday afternoon.

The company has launched its emergency response plan, bringing in experts in engineering, operating, environment and dangerous goods. CN crews have already started constructing a 460-metre stretch of bypass track to divert around the derailment site.

Chief operating officer Jim Vena apologized to local residents for the disruption caused by the derailment, adding that he is heading to the scene.

'Very hard to accept'

Rick Duguay, who runs Gogama's general store, woke early Saturday morning to what he described as a strange banging noise. Duguay has lived in the community his entire life and is accustomed to the sound of trains, but said this sound was different.

He's relieved the derailment happened outside of town. "Luckily it's not right here at the railroad crossing, but it's close enough and very hard to accept the things going on," Duguay said.

He wants to see changes put in place to make railroads safer, but doesn't think the two recent crashes are enough to prompt change.

"The worry was always there that a train wreck could happen in town ... but I mean, we lived with it all our life."

Morris Neveau said the two derailments so close together have left many in the Mattagami First Nation, just downstream from the recent derailment, unnerved.

"It affects our thinking and how we live, you know, because we live in fear, eh?"

'What can we do now?'

Gogama residents spent much of the weekend looking up at the large plume of black smoke looming over the town.

Dawn Simoneau, 33, said her two daughters have been asking questions about the derailment. "Like, 'Are the fish going to be okay?' and they are concerned as well," said Simoneau, a life-long Gogama resident, has lived her entire life with trains rumbling past and an ever-present fear that something might happen.

"This is just always the way it's been. And now ... we're thinking, 'What can we do now to make sure this doesn't happen again?'"

The derailment has some residents talking about the Energy East oil pipeline, which has faced opposition in other parts of northern Ontario.

Nickel Belt New Democrat MP Claude Gravelle said he didn't want to get into that debate while visiting Gogama on Saturday.

"Well, that's a different discussion for a different day, but there certainly are some concerns about pipelines. But there are concerns about rail cars. What's the safest? Accidents are accidents."

The intense heat of the fire has kept investigators away from the site so far, but investigators hope to find some answers Sunday about how much oil was spilled and what caused the derailment.