

CN train with crude oil derails, catches fire in northern Ontario

Second incident in a month near Gogama renews questions about the presumed safety of newer rail cars.

By: Jacques Gallant Staff Reporter, Toronto Star Published on Sat Mar 07 2015

A CN train derailment early Saturday in northern Ontario that caused a massive fire involved tank cars the agency responsible for investigating such incidents described as inadequate.

The derailment, which happened about 3 kilometres from the town of Gogama at around 2:45 a.m., comes less than a month after another fiery CN derailment in the area involving the same model of tank car.

“It’s frightening and nerve-wracking, especially after what happened in Quebec,” Roxanne Veronneau, owner of the Gogama Village Inn, told the Star, referring to the train derailment in Lac-Mégantic in 2013 that killed 47 people.

“People here are on pins and needles. The tracks run right through town ... I’m sure that there’s going to be a lot of talk afterward that this shouldn’t be in the middle of our town.”

There were no reports of injuries following the latest derailment, but multiple tank cars, which were transporting crude oil from Alberta to Eastern Canada, remained on fire late Saturday afternoon, said CN spokesman Mark Hallman.

“A preliminary assessment indicates a bridge over a waterway has been damaged in the derailment and that five tank cars have landed in the waterway. Some of these tank cars are on fire,” he said.

CN said that emergency responders deployed two lines of boom in the waterway to contain the oil, but that the drinking supply was not affected. No issues with air quality were detected, the company said.

In Gogama, a town of about 400 people located 200 kilometres north of Sudbury, Veronneau’s inn has become a sort of command post. Cleanup crews working at the site of the earlier derailment were still staying at the inn, and went into action when the latest incident happened.

“Thank goodness, because when the call came in, they bolted out the door and went to the other site,” said Veronneau, whose inn is about 200 feet from the train tracks that run through town. “The town is crawling with CN officials. There are so many vehicles outside my door right now.”

Veronneau said she spent Saturday working the phone, calling townspeople and asking for chainsaws, paddles, lifejackets and whatever other equipment the emergency and cleanup crews might need.

“The one good thing is that the wind was not blowing toward town, so the smoke is going the other way,” she said.

When asked what she would like the government to do, given that she and the other residents of Gogama have been through two derailments in less than a month, Veronneau replied:

“I’d have them move the track right out of Gogama.”

Hallman confirmed that the oil was being transported in tank cars built to the CPC-1232 standard, which Transport Canada ordered in January 2014 to be a requirement for all new tank cars constructed to carry flammable liquids.

Compared with the previous “legacy” Class 111 tank cars, which were involved in the Lac-Mégantic disaster, those built to the CPC-1232 standard have enhancements including half-head shields, improved top and bottom fitting protection and normalized steel, according to the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, which is investigating the latest Gogama derailment.

However, the TSB has sounded the alarm that the new CPC-1232 standard is still not enough to prevent ruptures and oil spills during derailments.

Another CN train derailment near Gogama on Feb. 14 involved tank cars built in the last three years to the new standard. No injuries were reported, but the derailment and subsequent oil spill caused fires that took almost a week to extinguish.

CN does not own the tank cars, said Hallman, but he declined to reveal who does, citing contractual confidentiality.

The investigation into the first Gogama derailment is ongoing. In its Feb. 23 progress update, the TSB wrote that the Class 111 tank cars built to the CPC-1232 standard, which had been travelling at the speed of 38 mph (61 km/h) at the time of derailment, “performed similarly to those involved in the Lac-Mégantic accident which occurred at 65 mph (105 km/h).”

The TSB reiterated that it wants tougher standards than CPC-1232 for all Class 111 tank cars.

“The TSB has warned (Transport Canada) that this standard was not sufficient and that more needed to be done to provide an adequate level of protection,” according to the update.

“Preliminary assessment of the CPC-1232-compliant tank cars involved in (the first Gogama derailment) demonstrates the inadequacy of this standard given the tank cars’ similar performance to the legacy Class 111 tanks cars involved in the Lac-Mégantic accident.”

Saturday’s incident is the fourth CN derailment in northern Ontario this year.

Hallman said CN executive vice-president and chief operating officer Jim Vena was en route to the derailment site Saturday. He said Vena “apologizes to the residents near Gogama for the inconvenience and disturbance caused by a second company derailment in such a short period of time.”

Keith Stewart, a spokesman for Greenpeace Canada, said it may take more deaths before the federal government orders tougher standards for tank cars carrying hazardous material.

“The safety authorities have been warning that even the newer cars are not safe, and we have to wonder where the federal government is in this,” he told the Star.