Crude oil spilled in CN derailment will impact ecosystems for long time, activists say

Toronto Star Raveena Aulakh March 9, 2015

As fires are extinguished at site of Gogama, Ont., accident, environmentalists worry that toxins will linger.

It could take weeks or even months to understand the real environmental impact of the crude oil spill from a derailed CN train near the town of Gogama, Ont., on Saturday, activists say.

“Everything goes somewhere ... The vast majority of what has already leaked or burned will never be recovered,” said Keith Stewart of Greenpeace Canada.

The crude oil will end up in the environment around Gogama, a tiny town about 100 kilometres south of Timmins, and “will affect that area for a long time to come,” Stewart said.

“Long after this initial spotlight fades away, we’ll still see impacts in the local ecosystems.”

Some crude will end up in the soil, some in the water, and the crude that burned “will deposit toxins in the area which will eventually get into the ecosystem,” he added.

Thirty-eight cars of a 94-car train derailed near Gogama at 2:42 a.m. on Saturday, triggering a massive blaze that burned furiously until it was extinguished Monday evening. Two cars plunged into the Matagami River. At least one ruptured and leaked crude into the water.

The two rail cars were removed from the river on Monday evening.

The train was carrying synthetic crude oil, an intermediate product produced when bitumen is upgraded to make it transportable. It is then shipped to a refinery where it is turned into a finished product.

It’s not yet known how much crude was spilled or how the train derailed, in part because it has been impossible for its investigators to get close to the actual site, a spokesperson for the Transportation Safety Board of Canada said.

The train that derailed near Gogama was transporting crude oil from Alberta’s oilsands to a refinery in eastern Canada.

This accident comes less than a month after another CN derailment and fire in the same area, in which more than one million litres of bitumen was released.

CN workers are still working at that site, a remote forested area about 40 kilometres from Gogama.

In dealing with the Gogama spill, CN has put containment measures in place in the river — three sets of booms — to trap spilled oil and prevent it from moving downstream, CN spokesman Jim Feeny said.

Water and air quality is being monitored and tested “at the derailment site and further down. We are using water to fight the fire and (have) built dams to contain the water at the site so it doesn’t flow away,” Feeny said before the blaze had been extinguished.

But Adam Scott of Environmental Defence says very little oil is ever recovered from spills.

“Companies will talk about cleanups but, in reality, the cleanup is only (of) a small percentage of the oil spilled. In a case like this, it could be crude oil submerged into the river, into the soil. There is a good chance that there will be (crude) permanently in the environment in the region in some way.”

There is no restoring the ecosystems to their original health, he said.

The last spill in the Gogama area “was over a million litres of dilbit and we still don’t have good information about the region, how it spilled and where it moved to. We are just not getting the kind of information you would expect from a spill like this,” Scott said.

(Dilbit is bitumen diluted with another product to make it easier to transport.)

There is more transparency when there are oil spills in the U.S., Scott said, adding the Environmental Protection Agency makes public its orders about what a company is required to do in the event of a spill.

Warren Mabee, an energy policy expert at Queen’s University in Kingston, said whatever kind of crude spill it is, it is bound to be a messy situation.

“Dealing with any kind of (spilled) crude oil will always be bad,” he said.

“The river is still moving and the ability to deploy booms will be hampered by ice. Look, any sort of release into the environment is bad, very bad. In winter, there may be slightly less ability (for crude to move) but there is less ability to clean up, too.”

This derailment isn’t comforting for people in communities where trains carrying crude trundle through, said Stewart.

Companies assure people that they have spill response plans in place, “but when your spill response plan is to let it burn for days, that’s kind of scary.”