

Railway Association explains itself

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Most people have heard of the Transportation Safety Board of Canada — the Railway Association of Canada not so much.

The railway association plays a vital roll in the development of rules and regulations for Canada's freight and passenger railways and has been operating since the 1920s.

"We work with the railways to develop rules which are taken by the government and given the force of regulation," Railway Association of Canada president and chief executive officer Michael Bourque said.

"We're constantly advocating on behalf of the industry for changes that will make sense and to not have changes that don't make sense."

In the overall scheme of things what the railway association does is comparable to what the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers does for the oil and gas industry, Bourque said.

The association works with Class 1 railways like CN, Canadian Pacific, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, short line freight railways, Via Rail, the Rocky Mountaineer tourist train and community systems like Go Transit.

Railways continue to be a vital shipping link for companies and a transportation mode for passengers but there was a time when railways were king.

"The history of the railways in this county is pretty substantial. There used to be a minister of railways. Government involvement has been quite strong. The country was built by a railway — not a rebellion," Bourque said.

He said railways have been accused of self-regulation but he said each railway has to comply with a myriad of rules and regulations. Railways follow rules and regulations in the Rail Safety Act, the Transportation of Dangerous Goods Act and other acts.

Bourque said although there have been numerous derailments this year, starting with the Lac Megantic, Quebec disaster in July, Canada's railways had an admirable record in 2012.

Bourque said North America's derailment record in 2012 worked out to an average of less than two accidents per million train miles. He said this is significant when you consider that CN and CP operate in both Canada and the U.S. This accounts for over 60,000 km of track — that's 35 larger than Canada's highway system. On average 140,000 railcars are in transit daily.

The Lac Megantic disaster will be etched in everyone's minds and will cloud the public's minds for years to come when it comes to derailments, Bourque said. As a result the disaster has ramped up media coverage of derailments, to the point that derailments that normally might not be covered are.

"A derailment is defined as a wheel coming off the track. It doesn't necessarily mean that a train has gone off the track — it doesn't mean that the load has been spilled or that anybody's hurt or any of those things."

In a typical year many minor derailments take place — most of them you never hear of because they occur in rail yards, he said.

“Our accident rate has been on a steady decline the past 10 years.”

Railways operate under safety managements systems — a legal requirement.

“These are based on continuous performance improvements. The proof that it works is in your performance management,” Bourque said.

Some members of the public think that the longer freight trains, some over two miles long, are a strain on the rails and may account for an increased number of derailments but Bourque discounts this theory.

“There are tremendous benefits to long trains including safety benefits.”

He explained that longer trains often have engines in the front, middle and rear resulting in a more stable and constant ride.

Maintenance of tracks and related infrastructure costs each of Canada’s major railways about \$2 billion a year, Bourque said.

Bourque criticized grain producer arguments that railways aren’t getting this year’s bumper crops to market fast enough and that the railways are forsaking their products in favour of carrying other lucrative commodities such as oil, potash and wood products. He said this is simply not true.

“CP and CN has delivered a record number of railcars for grains.”

Farmers had bumper crops this year but they’re not the only ones who are doing well. He said the lumber industry is booming and this translates to numerous loads that are being shipped to domestic and foreign markets.

“These guys have had a tremendous year. They’ve had tremendous success in opening up new markets in Asia.”

Containers filled with Chinese made goods are often going back overseas empty but Bourque can see this trend changing. He related the story of two young entrepreneurs who manufacture modular homes. Bourque said the two men are in the process of remodeling their modular homes parts so that they fit neatly into a container. This will open up new markets for the pair and increase business for the railways. Bourque said it’s likely others will follow their lead, boosting added-value opportunities for Canadian companies and for the railroads.