

More rail inspectors needed, Commons committee says

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Glenn Thibeault / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Transport Canada must ensure it has an “adequate” number of safety inspectors to oversee the rail transportation of dangerous goods, a House of Commons committee said Thursday.

The recommendation was among 10 in a report from the House Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, which examined how dangerous material is moved by all modes of transport.

The recommendations come not only in the wake of the 2013 Lac-Mégantic rail disaster in which 47 were killed, but also as small Canadian communities grapple with three train derailments in the last month.

The most recent incident occurred when 13 train cars derailed near the small community of Gregg in southern Manitoba, about 50 kilometres east of Brandon. CN reported that some refinery cracking stock was spilled but there was no threat to public safety. On Saturday, a derailment near Gogoma, Ont., caused a rail-car fire and some oil spilled into a nearby river system.

Conservative MP Jeff Watson, a committee member who is also the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Transport, could not say what would constitute an “adequate” number of inspectors or who would pay for them.

“In view of the Committee, our recommendation is to ensure that Transport Canada has what it needs to do in both its inspection and its audit function. We’ll take note that Transport Canada continues to hire, so it’s Transport Canada’s opinion that they’re going to need more resources that way,” he said.

Zach Segal, press secretary for Transport Minister Lisa Raitt, said in an email, “We are continuing to hire inspectors and we are giving more power to railway inspectors.” He did not say how many new inspectors have been hired.

There are currently 117 rail safety inspectors and 88 transportation of dangerous goods inspectors working for Transport Canada.

NDP transport critic Hoang Mai said only one inspector has been hired since 2013. He also said risk assessments for transporting dangerous goods should be made public.

“One of the recommendations that we have is for us to understand, and for the population to understand, where are the risks and what is being done to actually address those risks.” He said the government is not going in the right direction on rail safety because it has let companies “self-regulate” and “self-inspect.”

“It shows that the government is letting the railway companies do their own inspection with a lack of oversight.”

Segal said that among improvements to the federal railway safety system, Transport Canada has “increased fines for companies found to break our regulations, created whistleblower protection for employees who raise safety concerns and required each railway to have an executive legally responsible for safety.”

Under the proposed Safe and Accountable Rail Act, introduced in February by Raitt, railway companies “must obtain and maintain legislated minimum levels of insurance based on the type and volume of dangerous goods they carry.”

Shippers of crude oil must also pay a levy into a fund per tonne of crude oil shipped, which goes to pay to any damages, “exceeding a railway’s minimum insurance level if an accident involving crude oil occurs.”

The committee report echoes Transport Canada by calling for the replacement of an older model of railway car. The new models are expected to be more robust and safer for carrying flammable liquids.

Watson said discussions are underway between the Raitt and her American counterpart to harmonize standards with American railway car manufacturing companies.

The Committee also recommended that Transport Canada implement all of the recommendations for rail safety oversight mentioned in the Auditor General’s 2013 Fall Report, which said the department had an insufficient level of oversight to obtain assurance that companies’ safety management systems were adequate and effective.