

More guidelines needed to avoid freight train accidents: Agency

By Linda Nguyen, Postmedia News October 27, 2010



With freight trains getting longer and heavier, more needs to be done to improve safety practices for transporting goods by rail if the industry wants to prevent derailments, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada cautions in a new report.

Photograph by: Leah Hennel, Postmedia News

TORONTO — With freight trains getting longer and heavier, more needs to be done to improve safety practices for transporting goods by rail if the industry wants to prevent derailments, the Transportation Safety Board of Canada cautions in a new report.

The warning came Wednesday following an investigation into a six-car train derailment in March 2009 near Brighton, Ont., about 150 kilometres east of Toronto.

Investigators with the independent agency say one factor leading to the derailment was that the rail cars were unevenly loaded, causing the heavier back load to thrust forward, pushing the lighter front cars off the tracks.

The cars, in a 137-car CN train, included three carrying molten naphthalene, a substance categorized by the TSB as a "dangerous good."

They jumped the tracks just before 6 a.m. on March 21. No injuries were reported and none of the product was spilled. The train was travelling east from Toronto to Montreal when the accident occurred.

"There are no regulatory guidelines, standards, or instructions for (train companies)," said Rob Johnston, the acting director of the agency's rail investigations branch following a news conference in Toronto. "There is no other marshalling requirement, nothing to tell a railway that they need to manage and train (work) forces."

Marshalling is the order in which train cars are put together. Johnston said in this case, the Brighton accident could have been prevented if guidelines were in place to distribute the load. Current safety standards only encompass which cars along the line are permitted to carry dangerous goods.

According to the agency, 10 accidents — in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia and New Brunswick — can be blamed on improper and unsafe marshalling practices since 2000. Nine of the incidents cited in the report involve CN trains.

One of the derailments involved a 105-car train in Drummondville, Que., on Feb. 12, 2007. According to the TSB, a contributing factor in the crash was that the train was loaded with 25 light or empty cars in the front and 80 heavy loaded cars in the back. When a knuckle, the piece that attaches cars together, broke on the 75th car, it triggered the emergency brake and propelled the heavy cars forward causing the derailment.

Another incident occurred on Aug. 5, 2005 near Garibaldi, B.C., when nine cars derailed. One of the cars was carrying sodium hydroxide, or caustic soda, spilling 40,000 litres into the Cheakamus River. An investigation found that coupling long and short cars was a factor in the crash.

The agency cited similar causes for derailments in Bowden, Alta., Drummond, N.B., and other towns in Ontario.

Johnston said it's accepted industry-wide that longer trains are particularly at risk when lighter cars are put in front of heavier cars.

"As trains get longer and heavier, the risk of derailment increases. . . . (We) have pushed hard to make weight distribution on trains a priority," said Johnston in a statement. "While the TSB's warnings have led to some progress, more needs to be done to ensure longer, heavier trains will always be operated safely."

"The bottom line is, CN needs to manage these risks system-wide and Transport Canada needs to make sure there is an effective, long-term strategy in place for Canada's railways."

A spokeswoman for CN said the company is implementing some new guidelines on its trains to deal with weight distribution in light of the report.

"It's a work in progress," said Julie Senecal from CN's Montreal office. "We are confident that these measures will make a significant difference."

Freight trains used in Canada today can be as long as 3,600 metres and weigh more than 18,000 tonnes. Prior to 1990, on average, trains were only 1,500 metres long and weighed between 6,000 and 7,000 tonnes.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada is an independent agency that investigates incidents involving the marine, pipeline, railway and aviation sectors.

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