

BALDREY: Train accident revives oil transport debate

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View from **THE LEDGE** Keith Baldrey



A recent accident just south of the U.S. border didn't receive a lot of media attention in Canada, but it should nevertheless serve as a reminder that the debate about energy in this country is not just about building pipelines.

On June 3, a Union Pacific train carrying crude oil derailed near the Columbia Gorge, on the border between Washington state and Oregon. Four cars burst into flames, a nearby town was evacuated and the fact it still exists is thought to be owed entirely to an unusual shift in the wind, which miraculously didn't blow the flames into the town.

Shipping oil by rail has been on the steady rise in the U.S., as volumes from the Alberta oil sands and the shale gas deposits in North Dakota have outstripped the capacity of existing pipelines. The number of oil trains flowing through Metro Vancouver have also been increasing: from just six car loads in 2009, to more than 3,000 in 2014.

The Alberta oil sands industry will not suddenly cease to exist if no new pipelines are built. Even the most ardent climate change activists acknowledge it will take at least 30 years for any realistic "weaning" off of fossil fuels to take place.

In the meantime, the oil will move, one way or another: by pipeline, truck or rail. And studies show moving oil by rail is more dangerous than by pipeline (although both pose significant risks), and those are based on statistics mostly covering a time frame where relatively little oil was transported via rail trains.

The recent accident in Oregon was not as serious as the disaster that struck the Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic in July 2013, when 72 railcars carrying crude oil ran down a hill and slammed into the town, killing 47 people. But the outcome of what happened in Oregon could have been far worse, and residents there are now clamouring for a moratorium on oil-train traffic in that region.

I cite this recent U.S. accident simply to show there is a lot more going on when it comes to such questions as whether the Kinder Morgan pipeline should be expanded. Those on both sides of the issue sometimes leave the impression that it's an entirely yes or no proposition, that somehow oil will stop flowing if it isn't built.

Recently, Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson travelled to Ottawa to make the case the pipeline should not be twinned because it posed a unique and dangerous risk to the environment of Metro Vancouver and beyond. This is not a new cause for Robertson. He's been a vocal opponent of any Kinder Morgan expansion pretty much since day one, and has

vowed to continue his campaign until the federal government gives the project a green or red light sometime later this fall.

His remarks brought an immediate retort from Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi, who mocked Robertson's argument to reporters: "I wonder if he's forgetting that the Port of Vancouver is the third largest in North America and every single day it transports caustic soda ... ethylene glycol ... sulfur ... coal ... sugar ... what happens when there's a sugar spill? That's probably not very good for the wildlife."

Nenshi also pointed out tankers move through the port about once every week, with nary an incident (the additional pipeline will boost that number, however, to about one a day, albeit with much greater tugboat protection).

Nenshi's point about Vancouver (and Deltaport, and the Fraser River) being working ports of call is well taken, given that all kinds of industrial activity is constantly taking place along various shorelines (those two piles of yellow sulphur on the North Shore near the Lions Gate Bridge are as much a local landmark as anything else in Vancouver harbour) and many toxic materials are moving around.

It all goes to show this debate is a multi-layered one. It's not just about assuming all potential spill problems disappear if a pipeline is not built. They simply exist in other forms.

Pipeline? Truck? Railcar? Pick your poison. Like it or not, as long as we keep driving cars and buying plastic goods, one of those modes of transportation will continue to bring oil close to you.

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