



Shipping and deceiving

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BY VANCOUVER SUN MAY 7, 2014



Let's see, last year we had train derailments in Prince George, Quesnel, Chetwynd, Prince Rupert, Fort St. John, Fort Nelson and McBride.

The year before that, Williams Lake, Tete Jaune Cache, Dawson Creek, Taylor, Hixon, Jasper, Blue River, Telkwa, Tumbler Ridge, Kitwanga and Smithers.

Some of these incidents were attributed to events like sink holes suddenly appearing under rail beds, faulty line switches and collisions at level crossing or on sidings. Some were relatively benign, involving empty box cars, unloaded flat cars or relatively inert cargo like coal, pulp, lumber or sand. Some were trivial - a boxcar hitting the chocks at the end of a siding a bit too hard.

But more than a dozen involved tank cars, some carrying flammable and potentially explosive cargo.

One incident, at Mackenzie in 2012, involved runaway rolling stock when two unattended cars rolled away from a siding and through the switch, an alarming incident reminiscent of what caused the dreadful accident at Lac Megantic, Quebec.

Several involved fires.

Other reported incidents investigated by the Transportation Safety Board, like one in the rail yards at Prince George on Jan. 30, 2013, involved the rupture of a fuel tank which spilled more than 3,000 litres of diesel fuel. And then, on March 21, a tank car was found leaking diesel fuel in Prince George. On March 26, a tank car derailed in the Fort St. John yards. On March 31, another tanker was found leaking in Prince George.

Over the last decade there have been at least 300 rail accidents like these across the North. That was just the North. As Larry Pynn pointed out Tuesday, there were 110 derailments across B.C. last year, a 20 per cent jump, at a time when the number of rail cars carrying crude oil and petroleum products rose

almost 200 per cent.

So when municipal leaders and members of the public start worrying about the potential for another Lac Megantic, where the derailment and explosion of a train carrying oil vaporized the town centre, it appears to be an entirely reasonable concern.

And when government, railways and oil companies respond with secrecy and non-disclosure restrictions covering access to emergency measures information - in effect compelling municipalities to sign away their citizens' right to know about when and where hazardous cargoes transit their neighbourhoods - ostensibly because they are concerned about proprietorial security and terrorists attacking oil trains, the argument reeks of dissimulation.

Frankly it sounds more like an exercise in spin control from a government with a mania for suppressing information and a corporate excuse for not disclosing to the public the risks that it might find unpalatable.

Look, pipelines carry greater volumes of hazardous materials than trains. Some of them run directly beneath heavily populated urban residential districts. If they rupture, they have catastrophic effects - 20,000 people were evacuated from an Edmonton suburb on March 2, 1979, when a gas pipeline was breached, and residents of a Burnaby neighbourhood are still living with the consequences of a rupture in Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline five years ago.

Pipelines are fixed. Presumably they'd make a prime target for terror attacks. Yet, we put up government-mandated signs identifying the facilities and what they carry.

Presumably a propane, gasoline, or even a tank truck loaded with agricultural chemicals - the Oklahoma City bombing involved a lethal combination of fertilizer and diesel fuel - would also make a terrorist target.

Tanker trucks, which pass through urban neighbourhoods every day along marked and designated routes, are also required by federal and provincial law to carry placards which publicly identify what they carry and its hazardous nature.

BC Ferries posts its dangerous cargo sailings online. For example, I discover that Tuesdays at 10:25 a.m. no passengers are permitted on the sailing from Campbell River to Quadra Island because it's reserved for trucks carrying flammable and potentially explosive loads.

And while preparing this column, I went to the Port of Metro Vancouver website and looked up every ship in the harbour, with precise information about location - the oil tanker Kei, for example, was anchored at 49 degrees 17 minutes 52 seconds North and 112 degrees 56 minutes 4 seconds West, just off the loco petroleum terminal.

On the port's interactive map you can locate every petroleum, fertilizer and liquid chemical wharf on the Metro waterfront. In fact, from various websites anyone can obtain the movements of every bulk carrier, container ship, tug and passenger vessel entering or leaving the port.

Forgive me for observing here that playing the security card for information about hazardous train shipments through the middle of communities looks suspiciously like a case of closing the barn door long after all the other horses have escaped.

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