



Sarah Kenney <skenney@barringtonhills-il.gov>

VBH BOT Public Safety FYI

1 message

Robert Kosin <rkosin@barringtonhills-il.gov>

Fri, Nov 4, 2011 at 7:16 AM

To: Dolores Trandel <clerk@barringtonhills-il.gov>

Cc: Sarah Kenney <skenney@barringtonhills-il.gov>

Derailment raises old fears of EJ&E/CN merger

By Marni Pyke.

Article updated: 11/4/2011 5:25 AM

[PHOTO] Smoke rises from a train derailment involving eight cars that spans the Elgin and Bartlett borders Thursday November 3 2011. The call was escalated to a MABAS Division 2 box alarm and caused major traffic delays in the area as well as bussing concerns for students at the U-46 School district.

Brian Hill | Staff Photographer

There's a good chance the freight train that's detaining you at the local railroad crossing contains hazardous materials.

It's a common occurrence that generally goes unremarked until an incident such as Thursday's derailment of a Canadian National train in Bartlett that involved two tankers containing sodium hydroxide, or lye, and ferrous sulfite.

No toxic substances leaked out, but the accident resonated with local leaders who opposed CN's merger in 2009 with the smaller EJ&E Railroad, which extends through numerous north, west and south suburbs.

"It underscores the need to make the EJ&E as safe as possible, to reduce potential hazards and to reduce the chance for another freight accident," said Barrington Mayor Karen Darch, who led a coalition of towns in fighting the merger.

Federal regulators approved the deal because they agreed with CN's rationale that moving trains from its lines in Chicago onto the less-traveled EJ&E would ease a notorious freight bottleneck in the region.

"CN invests heavily in the latest safety technology in the rail industry," railroad spokesman Patrick Waldron said. "We monitor the tracks and equipment across the system, including the EJ&E where we've made a heavy investment."

The U.S. Surface Transportation Board acknowledged that the transaction "would increase the risk of an accident involving the discharge of a hazardous material along the EJ&E line and decreases this risk along the CN lines into Chicago." But the agency noted the risk of spill was low and federal hazmat transport rules along with CN's system of safeguards would be adequate to prevent a catastrophe.

Authorities don't yet know what caused the derailment, which set three train cars on fire.

A look at September numbers provided by CN showed train traffic on the EJ&E line between the Mundelein area and south of Naperville has increased by about 35 percent since the 2009 merger.

Across Illinois, there were 119 derailments, ranging from minor to major incidents, involving all railroads in 2010, according to the Federal Railroad Administration's database. Of those, nine involved CN trains. As a comparison, Union Pacific had 39 derailments and the BNSF Railroad had 32.

FRA data from January through August 2011 indicates there were 17 derailments involving trains carrying hazardous materials in Illinois. Of those, one case in Iroquois County involved a release of hazardous materials.

Of the 17 derailments with trains transporting hazmat goods, four involved CN, two involved BNSF and six were UP trains.

Another incident, not on the database yet, occurred Oct. 7 in northern Illinois near Tiskilwa, where a derailed Iowa Interstate Railroad freight train carrying ethanol exploded and caused a mass evacuation.

Darch said she was thankful there were no injuries in the Bartlett accident, unlike a June 2009 derailment of a CN train carrying ethanol in Rockford where an explosion and fire killed a woman and injured her family.

"There's a need to make sure (police and fire) are trained and understand what's on the train and are prepared to respond, she noted.

"Since acquiring the EJ&E, CN has worked with municipalities across the route in emergency response training," Waldron said. "We made sure those lines of cooperation were open today."

Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner, whose community is host to EJ&E — now CN — tracks said the recent derailment left him uneasy.

"I wouldn't say I have a great comfort level," Weisner said, adding that CN freight traffic is only going to increase. "We are certainly concerned about what the future will bring."

Railroad expert James Wilson of Naperville said the transport of hazardous materials is common across the country and there's an ongoing effort to ensure safety.

"Over the last couple of years, there's been a complete review of tank car safety standards and construction," said Wilson, a principal consultant on railroads for Infosys Ltd.

Railroads, trucks and barges carry hazmat items "because these materials make up all sorts of consumer products everyone uses. There's a demand for these products and they're shipped in vessels that are designed the best way they can be to withstand the rigors of any accident," Wilson said.

“While there's not a 100 percent guarantee everything will be safe, our safety record for hazardous materials in North America is way beyond anything (elsewhere).”

###
