

Most derailments are harmless. But what about the one that isn't?

By Marni Pyke Daily Herald

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[PHOTO] Rail cars burn after a hazardous materials spill caused by a derailment in Tiskilwa in October. Photo courtesy of ABC

It started off as a simple idea.

Check out a few derailment stats in light of the train disaster in Glenview that killed a local couple, and voila, a column.

But railroad safety turns out to be an onion-peeling process. A Federal Railroad Administration database leads to a National Transportation Safety Board recommendation that leads to a Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration document and so on.

That's why this week's column on railway transport of hazardous materials follows a Sunday story about derailment statistics.

Railroad officials told me that the number of derailments pales in comparison to the thousands of safe trips that transport goods to consumers and industry. One state employee questioned the focus on derailments when so many more fatalities and injury-causing accidents occur on roads and highways.

Yet, from 2002 to 2011, there were 1,511 derailments in Illinois, mostly low-speed incidents in rail yards. Of that total, 351 derailments were on mainline track in Illinois. Many were minor hiccups, but some messed up Metra commutes, destroyed infrastructure and took lives.

My downtown is bisected by a freight/Metra rail line that's a stone's throw from the Saturday farmers market, the ice cream shop and two coffee houses. It's idyllic. Moms with kids in strollers (me included), commuters and students all hang out, waiting for the huge freights carrying everything from coal to cars to hazmat to pass, unconcerned because nothing bad ever happens.

But consider the following stats from the Illinois Commerce Commission and Association of American Railroads:

- Railroads in Illinois carried 437.1 million tons of freight in 2009, of which 7 percent — or 30.6 million tons — were classified as hazardous materials. This could mean anything from “mild irritants” to poisonous and radioactive materials. The size of shipments can range from a pint to 42,000 gallons in a tank car, the ICC states.

“The big worry and concern is when you have hazardous materials involved in a derailment,” Northwestern University railroad safety researcher Ian Savage said. “Bad things can leak out and go into the groundwater. These are real issues if a tanker car catches fire.”

Considering the vast amount of hazmat rumbling through Illinois on freight trains, the number of derailments that involve chemicals being released into the environment is minuscule. But that doesn't mean the incidents themselves are insignificant.

The ICC reports 80 incidents from 2002 to 2011 in which train derailments resulted in the release of hazardous materials.

In same time period, there were 86 derailments of trains carrying hazardous materials in which no hazmat spilled.

Here's a look at some notable hazmat releases that occurred when trains derailed in 2011, according to ICC data.

- Jan. 27: A CSX train derailed in Decatur, releasing 2,900 gallons of diesel fuel.
- Jan. 30: A Union Pacific train derailed in East St. Louis, releasing 100 gallons of diesel fuel.
- April 8: A CN train derailed in Effingham, releasing 5 gallons of methyl methacrylate, a flammable liquid used to make resins and plastics.
- April 19: A TRRA train derailed in Venice, releasing 2,300 gallons of diesel fuel. TRRA is a small railroad operating in downstate Madison County.
- Oct. 7: An IAIS train derailed in Tiskilwa, releasing 180,000 gallons of ethanol causing an explosion and evacuations.
- Dec. 23: A BNSF train derailed in Galesburg, releasing 4,000 gallons of diesel fuel.
- Dec. 23: A BNSF train derailed in Joliet, releasing 2,500 gallons of diesel fuel.

So what's being done to reduce incidents, make tank cars safer and protect the public? Tune into next week's column for more onion peeling.

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Durbin urges railroads to do more inspections  
By The Associated Press  
Sunday, July 22, 2012

CHICAGO – Illinois congressmen want federal watchdog agencies to ensure railroad companies are conducting frequent track inspections to prevent rail derailments resulting from heat-related track buckling, after this month's deadly suburban Chicago accident.

U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin and Mark Kirk said at a Sunday news conference that they've sent a letter asking the Association of American Railroads to conduct a comprehensive review of the railroad industry's practices regarding the phenomenon known as track "sun kinks" and to make the findings available to the public.

"We want to make sure the trains moving freight and chemicals and hazardous waste, whatever it may be, are moving safely near and through our communities," the Illinois Democrats said Sunday near a stretch of train tracks in downtown Chicago.

Durbin's remarks come as investigators continue to examine the cause of a July 4 train derailment that killed Glenview couple Burton and Zorine Lindner. A Union Pacific freight train derailed and caused a suburban Chicago railroad bridge to collapse, sending train cars crashing onto the couple's car.

The triple-digit temperature that day may have caused a rail to expand, leading to the derailment, Union Pacific officials have said.

According to Durbin, sun kinks are believed to have caused three other train derailments in Texas, Washington state and Wyoming. When coupled with the Glenview incident, they caused \$5 million in property damage.

Tracks are built on land owned, maintained and inspected by the railroad companies, and there is no state agency that oversees their inspection activity, Durbin said. He added that there are no requirements for local notifications.

On June 16, the Federal Railroad Administration issued a safety advisory to draw rail owners' attention to the consequences of an unexpected track buckle in extreme heat.

Railroads are the backbone of Illinois' economy and passengers should be able to travel on them safely across the country, Durbin said.

About 500 freight trains carrying 631 million tons of cargo move through the Chicago area each day.

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