MEDIA ALERT        December 18, 2015 for Immediate Release

Not so FAST - the 2015 Transportation Act is Slow to Address Freight Rail Dangers

Just as Oil Exports Increase Risk

The end of the ban on domestic oil exports included in the 2016 tax and spending omnibus bill coupled with recent ethanol production mandates will seriously strain our Freight Rail Transportation System, escalating the risk of rail catastrophes. While the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act of 2015 contains sound provisions related to the rail transport of highly flammable materials, such as crude oil, tar sands oil and ethanol, they are not enough to meet the level of risk being placed on our communities. CARS commend Sen. Tammy Baldwin (WI), a cosponsor of the FAST Act for her work and looks forward to continuing efforts with her and other Congressional rail safety proponents focusing on our current dangerous situation.

“At a time when the U.S. is going to experience yet another exponential surge in the shipment of oil and ethanol by rail, robust improvements in freight rail safety requirements are being delayed or ignored,” stated Cathy Velasquez Eberhart CARS-MN (Twin Cities).

The FAST Act of 2015 contains freight rail safety provisions that relate to post-catastrophe issues, such as liability insurance for railroads or mandating spill response plans for trains hauling oil or ethanol. Preventative measures to reduce the occurrence of hazardous train derailments, spills and explosions are generally deferred or missing.

The need for improved freight rail safety regulations is compounded by the Congress’ elimination of the long-standing ban on exporting domestic oil. The policy shift is expected to increase crude-by-rail shipments by an estimated 4,500 rail tank-cars per day, according to the Center for American Progress.

Maureen Freedland CARS-LC (La Crosse) noted that shipments of crude oil by rail contain longer, heavier cars running along critical waterways and through cities on their way to coastal export terminals. “Legislation to lift the 40 year old crude oil ban comes at a time when we already have too many oil train spills and accidents,” she added.

“More and better regulations to reduce or eliminate the unacceptable, ongoing risk to persons and property can only be done by federal and state governmental authority,” Ralph Knutson also of CARS-LC pointed out. “It’s naïve to think that railroads will self-regulate.”

Freight rail safety will be further strained by the mandate issued on November 30, 2015 by the Environmental Protection Agency to increase ethanol production by 1.18 billion gallons in 2016. This increase in ethanol production, transported predominantly by train, equates to approximately 60,000 rail tank-cars per year.

An estimated 25 million people in the United States live within what is recognized as the danger zone, the mile-wide area bracketing railroad tracks that convey dangerous cargo. Adequate measures have not been taken to protect vulnerable populations, sensitive environmental areas, and drinking water against the dangers of trains carrying these hazardous materials and infrastructure in many places is aging and in need of repairs.

“Milwaukeeans living under the shadow of the rusty bridge by First and Oregon have been demanding to see the bridge structural integrity inspection report, which Canadian Pacific deemed too complicated for the general public to comprehend. With the FAST Act, would the ‘public version’ of this report provide for the public’s right to know?” asks Brian Chiu CARS-WI (Milwaukee Area).

Noticeably absent from the FAST Act of 2015 rail safety regulations are requirements to stabilize the volatility of oil prior to shipping by rail. Additionally, track inspection standards have not been legislated. The anticipated increase of freight rail shipments for oil and ethanol will stress the condition of rail tracks. Track inspection protocols could prevent the next hazardous train derailment.

“If the Feds are predicting a dozen major hazardous material spills each year, can we truly feel safe with this new legislation? If it takes 5 more years to change, could we honestly feel safer with 60 more explosions? Hardly!” emphasizes Alan Stankevitz, CARS – WI (La Crosse).
Highly volatile oil, ethanol and other hazardous materials + unsafe tank cars + lack of transparency + inadequate government regulations = danger for our communities.

About Citizens Acting for Rail Safety (CARS)

CARS is a regional, grass-roots advocacy group that works with the public and legislators to improve freight rail transportation systems for the benefit of the health, safety, and quality-of-life of people, wildlife, and the environment.

CARS Contacts

CARS – MN (Twin Cities): Cathy Velasquez Eberhart, 651-587-5356, saferailstwincities@gmail.com
CARS – WI (La Crosse): Alan Stankevitz, 224-422-0033, astankevitz@saferails.org; Ralph Knudson, 608-344-1688, nancyandralph@knudkin.com; Maureen Freedland, 608-796-1076, maureenfreedland@gmail.com
CARS – WI (Milwaukee Area): Brian Chiu, SafeRails.MKEArea@gmail.com

Resources

CARS website: www.saferails.org
CARS facebook: CARS, Citizens for Rail Safety

Attachments

Photo #1: Milwaukee Bridge on 1st and Oregon in Walkers’ Point, courtesy of CARS – WI (Milwaukee Area)
Photo #2: Engineers Inspect Bridge on 1st and Oregon in Walkers’ Point/Milwaukee, courtesy of CARS – WI (Milwaukee Area)
Photo #3: Ethanol Train in Minneapolis, courtesy of CARS – MN (Twin Cities)
Photo #1: Milwaukee Bridge on 1st and Oregon in Walkers’ Point, courtesy of CARS – WI (Milwaukee Area)
Photo #2: Engineers Inspect Milwaukee Bridge on 1st and Oregon in Walkers’ Point, courtesy of CARS – WI (Milwaukee Area)
Photo #3: Ethanol Train in Minneapolis, courtesy of CARS – MN (Twin Cities)