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## Oil risks roll on Vermont's rails

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Repeatedly, during the course of several days at the Burlington railyard, Federal Railroad Administration safety expert Rick Towle circled back to the incident.

The lethal combination of ample fuel, human error and inadequately armored tank cars, he told emergency workers, can too easily be replicated elsewhere.

"This is a whole new world for the railroads," Towle said.

The wake-up calls are overdue, said Mollie Matteson, a Richmond-based scientist with the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity.

"In terms of safety, this is an under-regulated, 19th-century industry," Matteson said. "Oversight hasn't caught up with the volume and volatility of the cargoes. I think the public has been deliberately kept in the dark."



Members of local fire departments participate in a recent safety training at the Vermont Rail System rail yard in Burlington. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

### Cross-section

Unlike New York, Vermont isn't a candidate as a conduit for large-scale shipments of Bakken crude or Alberta tar-sands oil. But it's no secret that a derailment of tank cars into Lake Champlain, spread by wind and currents, would threaten already-struggling lake ecosystems far beyond a crash site.

Trains on this side of the lake could raise hell, too, added federal transportation safety analyst Bernie Kennedy.

A projected slide showing the innards of a typical locomotive illustrated Kennedy's point. Even toting grain cars, a train's engine presents a whopping potential for fire and toxic spills.



Bernie Kennedy, a safety analyst with the U.S. Department of Transportation, describes the vulnerabilities of a tank car to members of local fire departments during a recent training session in Burlington. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS )

A locomotive's low-slung fuel tank holds up to 6,000 gallons of diesel, 410 gallons of lubricating oil, 50 gallons of battery acid and 380 gallons of coolant, according to the Federal Railroad Administration.

## Beats a barge

Tracks following the gentle grades of waterways and wetlands give railroads an advantage of efficiencies, Kennedy said — but also raise the risks of pollution while shortening emergency response times.

On a daily basis, petroleum products of a more refined sort are freighted up and down the east coast of Lake Champlain. The region's gasoline, diesel and heating oil — necessities — reach these parts in tank cars.

During the first three-quarters of the 20th century, most of our hydrocarbons of choice arrived by barge.

Trains took over as a more stable, environmentally friendly alternative.

As with barges, rail-borne oil today is defined by its proponents and detractors as a busy junction of cost, benefit, safety and risk.

## Pay at the pump

Safety comes first, said Selden Houghton, assistant vice president of Burlington-based Vermont Rail System.

With “a tremendous amount of oversight” from the Federal Railroad Administration, the company regularly holds safety training with all of the municipalities on its 350 miles of track, Houghton continued.

“The cost of education far outweighs the cost of an incident,” he said. Another cost looms larger on the



A kerosene tanker truck takes on fuel at the Vermont Rail System yard earlier this month. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS )

bottom line: a fast-tracked replacement of tank cars deemed too weakly shielded to protect a flammable cargo. I'm a fried egg."

That surcharge, Houghton said, likely will show up on consumers' fuel bills.

## Truckin'

Department of Homeland Security restrictions kept Houghton from disclosing the logistics of petroleum shipments — the contents and quantities — but he volunteered that volumes fluctuate with demand and season, and regional markets are nowhere near as large as the flush of crude from the continent's interior.

Fuels that arrive by rail are pumped into fleets of tanker trucks, either at the Burlington yard or at the Global LP "tank farm" storage site on Flynn Avenue, due east of Oakledge Park.

From there, the inflammables hit the road — safely, more often than not, but subject to chance encounters with other, smaller petroleum-powered vehicles.

Brion Muzzy, operations manager for Vermont Railway, said that, as a motorist, his options are limited in the ranks of the big rigs: "What if that big trailer starts to fantail?