

May 01, 2014

THE HUFFINGTON POST

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

How Many More Fiery Rail Explosions Do We Need?

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Wednesday's fiery train derailment in Lynchburg, Va., is yet another disturbing reminder of the dangers of increasing shipments of particularly explosive Bakken crude oil from North Dakota and western Canada.

Shipments of the oil have ramped up dramatically in recent years and a series of derailments, including one in Quebec that killed 47, have raised serious safety concerns.

We've got to do something. The best first step is a moratorium on these shipments until we know for sure that people and the environment can be protected.

Here's why we need a timeout: The volume of crude oil shipped by rail in the United States increased from 9,500 carloads in 2008 to 400,000 carloads in 2013 -- a more than 40-fold expansion. Much of that oil is from the Bakken region, which, in a study of 86 different crude oils from around the world, contained several times more combustible gases than other oils tested, according to The Wall Street Journal.

And yet, despite this massive increase in rail shipments of an explosive fuel, there's been

little public scrutiny, and even less government action, to make sure we're doing everything we can to make it safe.

Over the last year or so, we've seen the terrible dangers these oils pose when they're shipped by rail.

In the summer of 2013 a runaway train transporting 72 tankers of Bakken crude careened into the Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic, killing 47 people and incinerating the downtown.

On Dec. 30 a train transporting Bakken crude oil derailed and exploded near Casselton, N.D., prompting an evacuation of residents within five miles of the accident. In January, a 122-car train carrying Bakken crude derailed and caught fire near Plaster Rock in New Brunswick, prompting evacuation of yet another town.

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Now, it's Lynchburg, Va. Emergency responders initiated a major evacuation of the downtown because of flames and smoke. Hundreds of people were affected. The James River was on fire. Downstream, the city of Richmond, switched to an alternate drinking water source.

Rail workers colloquially refer to these 100-tanker trains of Bakken oil as "bomb trains." It appears this is not exaggeration.

These “bomb trains” are traveling railways all over the country through towns and cities and along some of our most precious waterways, including along Lake Champlain and the Hudson River in the East and along the Columbia River through the Columbia Gorge in the West. Plans are in the works to further escalate the amount of Bakken crude moving through upstate New York, as Albany and the Hudson River corridor become a major transportation funnel for oil shipped from the western United States and Canada to East Coast refineries.

In Oregon, a terminal that was originally permitted to process and ship ethanol was converted to an oil terminal and for the past year has moved millions of gallons of Bakken crude from rail to ship with little public scrutiny or consideration of the risk to hundreds of thousands of people, precious salmon runs and other wildlife dependent on the Columbia River.

At what point do we stay “hold on, no more of this,” get a moratorium in place, and figure out exactly how we’re going to put a stop to these crashes, fires, derailments and oil spills? I think that moment has arrived.