Time to Move on Dangerous Tank Cars

By THE NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD
MAY 29, 2014

The main railway lines in New York have become superhighways for railroad tank cars filled with combustible crude oil. They rumble by the hundreds across the state as part of a surge in shipments from booming oil fields in North Dakota to terminals and refineries in the Northeast. It is up to the Obama administration to make those cars safer for everyone in their path.

Last year, American railroads shipped more than 400,000 carloads of crude oil, a fortyfold increase from 9,500 in 2008. One derailment last July in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, resulted in an explosion that killed 47 people. Last month, a train derailed near downtown Lynchburg, Va., causing a fiery blast that sent 30,000 gallons of crude oil into the James River.

Federal transportation officials have issued an emergency order acknowledging the "imminent hazard" posed by these trains and requiring railroads with trains carrying more than one million gallons (or about 35 cars) to inform local authorities in advance.

On May 7, Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx told a Senate panel that he had sent the White House a draft proposal that would require the industry to phase out older cars or upgrade them to be more resilient in a crash.

The White House should not sit on this proposal. The train that exploded in Lynchburg was going far slower than the recommended speed limit, a sign that older cars can be dangerous at any speed. The Association of American Railroads, which has called for hardening or updating older cars, estimates that 78,000 of the 92,000 cars now moving oil will need to be replaced or retrofitted.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has recognized the threat to the residents and waterways of New York State and has ordered extra inspections and emergency drills. The California Senate this week passed a bill that would improve emergency responses. But there is only so much states can do. A safer system will require strong federal rules.