

Environmental Groups Raising Alarms Over Rail Transport Of Crude Oil Through Adirondacks And Hudson



DOT-111 rail car Credit Harvey Henkelmann/Wikimedia Commons

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By Pat Bradley / New York News

The number of crude oil tanker cars being hauled on trains south from Canada to the Port of Albany has increased substantially over the past year. Several environmental groups are expressing concerns over potential accidents and demanding action.

The tanker cars are hauling the controversial Bakken oil, or fracked crude oil, on rail lines that travel along Lake Champlain, and across rivers and streams of the Adirondack Park. The Adirondack Council is expressing

concerns about the increased volume of rail transport and the safety of the oil tank rail cars. Deputy Director Diane Fish notes that very little oil would contaminate the waters, and the tracks are often very close to the lake and rivers. “We know that the DEC looked at the issues for Albany. But we’re not really sure that they looked at the issues for the Adirondack Park should something happen. There’s also the concern for human safety. These cars, the DOT-111 cars, that are being phased out but are still being used currently are the cars that are blamed for the terrible accident in Quebec last summer that killed 47 people. These DOT-111 cars are now running

through 12 small towns in the Adirondacks along the western shore of Lake Champlain. So we're very concerned about the potential risk to the people in those communities too."

The route along Lake Champlain travels through Essex County. The Board of Supervisors recently invited emergency responders from across the county to meet with CP Rail officials for a safety presentation. Board of Supervisors Chair Randy Douglas says they are concerned and want to make sure emergency services are prepared. "The first step for us was to have the initial meeting with CP rail. We asked a lot of real hard-line questions. But I do think down the line it wouldn't hurt to have the DEC and the Environmental Protection Agency take a look at the oversight and make sure that us in Essex County are well prepared in case a disaster does happen."

Some of the rail tracks along Lake Champlain are inches from the water. Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve Partner Dave Gibson began to sense a serious problem when kayaking last summer near Fort Douglas. "The most important action that can be taken is for the Governor to order the department to conduct a full EIS at the Port of Albany. But that EIS scoping process take into account all of the transportation corridors including the one at the Port of Albany, down Lake Champlain and the Hudson Valley. And the EPA should collaborate in the EIS process."

In a notice of intent to sue the U.S. Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency, the Center for Biological Diversity notes that in 1999 there was almost no crude nor refined oil transported by rail in the region. At the time, the document continues, the storage capacity for oil products in the

Albany area was about nine million barrels. But that has changed dramatically. The legal document says: "More than one billion gallons of Bakken crude oil alone passed through the Port of Albany by rail last year.....with plans for further increases in the works." The center lists 17 endangered species that could be affected by a crude oil spill from a train derailment, or barge or tanker accident in the Hudson River Corridor. Center for Biological Diversity Northeast Conservation Advocate and Senior Scientist Mollie Matteson says their suit focuses on the Hudson River area because there is a plan in place to focus on oil spills. "Unfortunately it's outdated because it does not address this huge change that we've seen in crude oil transportation in the Hudson and throughout New York over the last couple of years. But we focused on that because that was something concrete that we could address. Also it has the 17 federally protected species in that waterway and out in the bay that the plan also needs to address. That does not mean that there isn't a concern about spills elsewhere, including of course, Lake Champlain."

Federal and state officials and the New York/New Jersey Regional Response Team, which provides technical assistance for emergencies involving hazardous substances, were scheduled to meet Wednesday and Thursday in Albany to discuss the region's plan to prevent and respond to oil spills.