

Changes in the nation's oil production affect Plumas
Volatile trainloads of Bakken oil winding through the Canyon

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From pipeline to railcar, the nation's oil companies are making a transition that has federal, state and local officials worried about public safety and environmental disasters.

And that worry extends right here to Plumas County where the threat of disaster is literally rolling through town.

The Burlington Northern Santa Fe is carrying tanks of Bakken crude oil on its line that runs along the east shore of Lake Almanor to Greenville and then down the Feather River Canyon.

Bakken oil, a product obtained through fracking, is considered more volatile than other forms of crude oil.

The oil's danger was revealed during last July's accident in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, where half of the town was leveled and 47 people killed when 63 tank cars of oil exploded during a derailment.

As the United States shifts from external sources of oil, and oil companies embrace the flexibility that rail provides, the amount of oil delivered by rail has increased dramatically.

According to the Association of American Railroads, trains transported 97,135 carloads of crude oil during the first quarter of 2013, which was a 166 percent increase from the first quarter in 2012, and 922 percent more than for all of 2008.

As crude shipments have increased so have spills and derailments.

According to the Office of Hazardous Materials Safety, nationally more crude oil was spilled in rail accidents in 2013 than was spilled in the nearly four decades prior.

In California, incidents involving oil carried by rail increased from three in 2011 to 25 in 2013, with 24 to date this year.

The reasons for the accidents vary, but include track failure, inadequate rail car equipment and human error.

Given that more oil is being carried by rail, and incidents involving oil are increasing, jurisdictions are responding.

Report names Plumas

In the just-released report "Oil by Rail Safety in California" a task force representing a host of state agencies studied the situation and singled out their areas of chief concern, general safety issues and remedies.

"In California, trains transporting crude oil are expected to travel via the Feather River or Donner Pass to the Bay Area, the Tehachapi Pass to Bakersfield, or into Los Angeles. As a result, they will travel through some of the state's most densely populated areas, as well as some of the most sensitive ecological areas, since rail lines frequently operate near or over rivers and other sensitive waterways in the state," reads the report.

It continues: "The high hazard areas for derailment are generally located with high natural resources vulnerability and nearby waterways (e.g. Dunsmuir, the Feather River Canyon)."

In analyzing the risk in these high-hazard areas, the report focuses on the need to support first responders.

"According to a recent analysis conducted by OES (Office of Emergency Services), numerous local response offices lack adequate resources to respond to oil by rail accidents. Many of these first responders are in rural areas, such as Plumas, Siskiyou and Modoc counties, where some of the highest-risk rail lines are and some of our most pristine natural resources are located. Additionally, many of these areas have little or no funding for firefighters and rely on volunteer firefighters."

County response

Jerry Sipe, the county's OES director, has been working with railroad representatives and local fire departments.

"We are trying to be proactive," Sipe said, adding that the threat of a spill is a very real possibility.

"We've had some pretty large derailments," Sipe said, recalling one caused by falling rock as the train passed by.

In areas prone to falling rocks wire mesh has been installed designed to stop the rocks and trigger an alarm when a slide occurs.

Sipe is working with Butte County to develop a joint plan for dealing with a Canyon derailment.

And he is working with fire departments to ensure that the necessary training is provided.

One of Sipe's concerns is the volatility of the Bakken oil and that there is no marking on the train car to alert emergency responders.

"It comes in a crude (oil) container, but it behaves more like gasoline," he said. Since both types of oil will be carried, Sipe said firefighters will have to take a defensive approach when they respond.

Labeling containers is one of the many safety recommendations the state is asking the rail lines to implement.

"If first responders can quickly identify an incident involving Bakken, or similar crude, from a safe distance by using visual information on the placard, decisions can be made on whether to attack the fire or spill, or take a more defensive posture and wait for additional resources," the state report reads.

But in addition to the placards, there is also an issue with the tanks themselves.

The U.S. Department of Transportation issued a statement June 10 announcing new emergency actions to keep crude oil shipments safe.

Included in that statement is a strong recommendation for "the use of tank cars with the highest level of integrity in their fleet when transporting Bakken crude oil."

The DOT also issued an emergency order “requiring all railroads operating trains containing large amounts of Bakken crude oil to notify State Emergency Response Commissions about the operation of these trains through their states.”

The National Transportation Safety Board issued its own findings on crude oil transport by rail and found that it was often incorrectly labeled and not transported with the level of protection required by a hazardous material. That report also found inadequacy in planning to avoid population areas and environmentally sensitive areas, and a need for response plans.

Railroad response

Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for Burlington Northern Santa Fe, said that the railroad doesn’t share specific route information with the public for safety reasons, but added that “we have been transporting hazardous materials for many, many years and 99.9 percent arrive at their destination safely.”

She said that there currently are “only two trains per month in the entire state” that are carrying the Bakken oil.

Union Pacific is not currently carrying the oil through this area.

What’s next

Supervisor Sherrie Thrall, who represents the Lake Almanor area, said some of her constituents had shared their concerns with her after they learned of the dangers.

Thrall said that the supervisors have not discussed the issue, but she has talked with Sipe about evacuation and containment plans.

Sipe said that after the Cantaro Loop Spill near Dunsmuir in 1991, the state implemented an emergency plan, and there is a Feather River hazardous materials contingency plan.

The Cantaro Loop Spill, which involved a chemical spill, killed all aquatic life in a 45-mile stretch of the Sacramento River including 1.1 million fish. But the damage wasn’t limited to the fish. Rail workers and

first responders developed lasting health problems linked to the toxic cloud of gas that rose after the derailment.

Sipe said the county will be as proactive as possible, but much of the work lies with the railroads to make the transportation of the Bakken oil as safe as possible.