

Canadian rail companies getting tough new rules to track maintenance issues

(The Canadian Press circulated the following story by Terri Theodore (CP) on August 29, 2009.)

VANCOUVER, B.C. — For nearly a decade, countless Canadian freight trains traversed the continent on potentially faulty wheels -several of them derailing as a result - while recall "shortfalls" by Canadian National Railway and inaction by Transport Canada hamstrung efforts to get them out of service.

Now, Ottawa is cracking down on Canadian railways to force them to keep track of their parts in hopes of eliminating the systemic problems that allowed the wheels to remain in use for more than eight years.

Legislation is being drafted to impose tough tracking requirements on the rail industry, similar to those already in place for aviation companies, Transport Canada spokeswoman Maryse Durette told The Canadian Press.

"We didn't know which cars had been maintained or which wheels ended up where," Durette said.

"Now, the railways (will be) required to record for traceability all freight car major components, including the wheels, through a data-collection initiative with industry."

The new rules were prompted in part by defective wheels manufactured in a Canadian National Railway shop in Winnipeg over three years beginning in 1998.

The wheels, blamed by the Transportation Safety Board for a series of derailments dating back to June 2000, have proven maddeningly difficult to track down.

By last year, the safety board had blamed the wheels for at least 18 different derailments. None were fatal, but some 100 cars went off the tracks.

It wasn't until June of last year that Transport Canada issued a rare directive ordering that the wheels be identified and removed from Canadian trains. The department cited "shortfalls" in CN's earlier two attempts at recalling the wheels as the reason for the directive.

"In my opinion, there remains an immediate threat to safe railway operations," Luc Bourdon, director general of Transport Canada, wrote in a letter to CN.

Kelli Svendsen, a CN spokeswoman, declined to be interviewed by The Canadian Press, but said in an email that the company has complied with all requirements to track specific equipment components, such as the recalled wheels.

"Although the vast majority of wheels have been inspected and changed out as required, each month CN reports to Transport Canada on the progress of wheel inspections and several railroads are assisting CN with completing the inspections," the email said.

But even now, it remains unclear whether all of the wheels are out of service in Canada, and even less so whether they are still being used on rail lines

elsewhere in North America.

Indeed, no one knows where the wheels are or how many might be out there, said Ian Naish, the TSB's director of rail investigations.

"We would just be guessing," Naish said. "It doesn't look they're all in, that's for sure."

The problems began in 1998 when the Transcona shop modified its boring process to try to solve a wheel-misfit problem. Not long afterward, CN noticed a number of loose or out-of-gauge wheels on its freight cars.

CN linked the so-called "loose-wheel phenomenon" to the modified boring process as early as 2001, according to a report released last year by the board, which investigates air, rail and marine incidents in Canada and makes safety recommendations.

By then 48,000 sets of wheels had gone into circulation, both on CN trains and on trains operated by many other railways around North America. As is standard procedure in the railway business, the wheels were frequently switched between cars during reconditioning and repairs.

In February 2002, the company informed the federal Transport department about the defect, but did not notify other railways.

CN attempted to remedy the problem on its own by sending two wheel recalls to North American rail companies with the help of the Association of American Railroads.

The recalls were issued in November 2001 and February 2002, but the safety board concluded in a report released in 2008 that those recalls were "limited and incomplete."

The recalls targeted just over 14,000 tank cars with wheel mounting dates in 1998 and 1998, even though the faulty wheels were made up to 2001.

The TSB report examined a CP Rail crash in January 2006 where the wheels were blamed for an accident that sent 12 freight cars off the tracks near Buckskin, Ont., a two-hour drive north of Toronto.

Had the industry been further informed about the faulty wheels, the report concluded, car fleets could have been inspected and the wheels removed from service, instead of being reconditioned and put back on other trains.

By the end of 2007, CN estimated there were still as many as 12,000 of the defective wheels in service, but because rail companies don't keep track of their parts no one could say where the wheels were.

"The inability to quickly locate defective wheel-set components increases the risk of failure, which can lead to derailment," the report said.

Durette said the forthcoming legislation is still being drafted and will include all Canadian railways. It's not clear whether it will be as strict as similar rules for aviation companies.

For aircraft, detailed records must be kept pertaining to the manufacture, identification and maintenance of every part.

A brief description of any work performed on the part is required, along with the date of maintenance and the name of the employee involved, a

description of any defects found, any work still to be completed and any other pertinent details.

Transport Canada is now satisfied that all the defective wheels are out of service in Canada, said Durette.

"CN says they're satisfied that all the wheels are off their CN cars," she said.

"They've been identified and removed. There's the same possibility that some wheels might have made their way onto U.S. cars, so that's why there is an Association of American Railroads advisory in place."

The Transport Canada directive was distributed to 34 other railways that may be using the defective wheels, but there's no way of knowing if those wheels are still on the tracks somewhere in North America.

Both CN and Canadian Pacific Rail have been through their fleets looking for the faulty parts, but there's no doubt some are still rolling under trains from other North American companies, Naish acknowledged.

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