

Damage Control: Oil Train Derailment in Alberta and Gas Fracking Protest in New Brunswick

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Another oil train derailment and explosion in Canada has sent nearby residents fleeing from their homes in the middle of the night. It happened at 1 a.m. on Saturday, October 19 on a CN Rail line outside the hamlet of Gainford, Alberta, 85 km west of Edmonton.

The accident coincides with new steps by the Canadian government to extend oil and other resource extraction into the Arctic.



The CN Rail derailment at Gainford, Alberta on October 19, 2013.

A portion of a long, mixed-cargo CN Rail train traveling westbound derailed. Nine of the derailed wagons were carrying liquid petroleum gas (propane) and four contained crude oil. Three of the propane wagons exploded into flames. A fourth was breached. The accident closed the adjoining Trans-Canada Highway for days. Fortunately, no lives were lost or serious injuries sustained in the conflagration.

The 125 residents of Gainford were evacuated from their homes and a state of emergency was declared in the surrounding area. Some residents evacuated their homes with only the sleeping clothes they were wearing. A [CBC News report](#) provided home video footage of the fire burning soon after the derailment.

Local Residents

Gainford resident Denise Anderson said her family received notice to leave at 3 a.m. "Two fire and rescue guys came and banged on the door and [they] tell me I had to evacuate because there was a train derailment," she said. "They told me to get dressed and I had to go."

Taxidermist Jeanette Hall lives right across the highway from the derailment and she told CBC News, "I woke up to something that sounded like an airplane landing on Highway 16 and the next thing you know you hear the boom-boom-boom of the train falling apart."

"Everything lit up. Next thing you know, the curtains melted to the window and we took off running downstairs. I thought 'we gotta get to the basement - everything's gonna blow up' - and then we happened to look outside and the entire front yard is on fire."

"We should have died in that - and we didn't. I can't explain how the house and everything didn't get burned down," she said. "It was hell. It was absolute, utter hell."

The evacuation lasted four days because the fires consuming the three propane wagons could not be safely extinguished. Emergency officials and local firefighters, the latter equipped with little more than water hoses, decided to leave the wagons to burn. The danger of the six other propane wagons exploding was settled by a combination of venting the fuel and setting explosive charges to set them on fire.

CN managed to drag the four oil wagons away from the fire. The worst damage to nearby homes was the melting of vinyl siding.

Fossil Fuel Industry Damage Control

This accident happened on the main CN Rail line that connects western Canada to the British Columbia coast at Prince Rupert and Vancouver. It wasn't supposed to be possible. CN says the line receives the very best inspections and preventive maintenance that it can provide, including ultrasonic examination of the rail, visual inspection of the rail bed and visual and electronic surveillance of the moving train. The train was inspected upon leaving Edmonton and was traveling at 35 km/hr.

One local resident told CBC that he and his neighbours believe the stretch of rail bed in the area is inherently unsafe because it was laid overtop of a bog.

This was the third train derailment in western Canada in as many weeks. Just two days prior, [four CN rail wagons](#) carrying anhydrous ammonia left the rails in Sexsmith, Alberta, forcing residents from their homes. In Landis, Saskatchewan, [17 CN rail wagons](#) derailed on September 25. Three were carrying lubricating oil and one carried ethanol. Authorities rushed to evacuate a nearby primary school.

Just down the Trans-Canada highway from Gainford is the site of an infamous [CN derailment in 2005](#) that dumped 700,000 liters of Bunker C fuel and 88,000 liters of pole-treating oil into and around Wabamun Lake. A Transportation Safety Board investigation found that the train derailed when the rail beneath it broke due to defects. CN pleaded guilty to three charges under provincial and federal environmental legislation and was fined \$1.4 million.

The Gainford accident comes less than a week after a pro-fossil fuel industry working committee of the Alberta and British Columbia governments [threatened to fast-track](#) a plan for shipment of oil-by-train (tar sands bitumen) from Alberta to the BC coast. A consortium including CN Rail and the Chinese, state-owned tar sands company Nexen says it could transport the equivalent of Northern Gateway to an export terminal to be built in Prince Rupert on the northern BC coast using seven, 100-wagon trains per day. The plan was [revealed last month](#) by Greenpeace Canada researcher Keith Stewart using access to information procedure. This plan would use the very track on which the accident that occurred at Gainford.

The oil-by-train threat is prompted by the ongoing 'wall of opposition' in BC to the Northern Gateway tar sands pipeline to Kitimat (south of Prince Rupert) that Enbridge Inc says it wants to build. The menace was reported as [front page news](#) in Vancouver on October 16. Needless to say, the more the number of train accidents grows, the harder it will be to sell such a plan. Opposition to tar sands pipelines and ocean-going tankers is so strong that the BC government has been obliged to [posture](#) as an ardent defender of strict 'environmental safety standards' on any pipeline movement of oil or bitumen (all the while working furiously behind the scenes, out of public scrutiny, to realize the project).

Safety and Oil-by-Rail – Like Mixing Oil and Water

The notion that the movement of oil by rail can be made safe is a steady theme of the fossil fuel-promoting efforts of the federal, Alberta and BC governments. As the black clouds from the propane fires were billowing over Gainford on October 19, federal Minister of Transport Lisa Raitt [was telling the Globe and Mail](#) that the rail transport system is safe. “Over 99.9 per cent of the time, the dangerous good makes it to its final destination.”

But she couldn’t avoid the shadow that looms over all present and future talk of oil train safety in North America – the July 6 oil train disaster in Lac Mégantic, Quebec that killed 47 of the town’s residents. Raitt said, “But all that being said, we still lost 47 people and it’s up to us to ensure that if there are mitigating things we can do, that we can learn from, that’s what we should be doing.” Raitt was assigned as transport minister three months ago. She is a lawyer by training.

Alberta’s Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development, Diana McQueen, told the same edition of the *Globe*, “This weekend is absolutely very, very unfortunate. But when we look over all at some of the statistics on rail ... about 99 per cent of all dangerous goods rail shipments reach their destination safely.”

Minister of Natural Resources Joe Oliver, the chief shill for the federal government’s fossil fuel promotion, including its recent ‘pipeline or else rail’ theme, [told the Globe](#) on September 25 that the “overall” safety record of the railways “has been a very good one.”

The federal government says it is “taking action” for better rail safety, repeating that message in last week’s speech opening a new session of Parliament. It put on quite a show for the speech by inviting the mayor of Lac Mégantic to sit in as a special guest.

But the government is refusing a key demand of provincial and municipal governments – that they be informed in advance of the movement of dangerous rail cargo through their jurisdictions. It has failed to act upon safety recommendations by its own railway agencies in recent years. And it continued and extended the policies of previous Liberal governments of devolving the responsibility for rail safety to the companies themselves in the respective industries.

When a *Toronto Star* reporter asked CN for the name of the shipper of the wagons that derailed in Gainford, [the answer was ‘no’](#), because such information is protected by “client privilege.”

Bruce Campbell, executive-director of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, has just published a study on the systematic erosion of railway safety that contributed to the tragedy at Lac-Mégantic. It’s titled, [The Lac-Mégantic Disaster: Where Does the Buck Stop?](#).

CN is [currently fighting an unjust dismissal lawsuit](#) by a whistleblower employee from its Memphis, Tennessee yard. He says the company covered up reporting of minor derailments and falsified its performance numbers for freight delivery in order to boost executive bonuses and shareholder value.

The issue of the safety of the class of railway wagons carrying the majority of ethanol, chemicals and petroleum products in North America has come to the fore following the Lac Mégantic disaster. Known as DOT 111, they are single hulled and can be too easily breached

when they are involved in a crash or derailment. [According to the Railway Association of Canada](#), there are some 240,000 DOT 111 wagons operating in North American Railroads, of which half have received some kind of modification to improve their safety.

That appears to contradict a [recent report by NBC News](#) that has the American Railway Association saying about 32,000 DOT 111 wagons carry crude oil in the U.S. and only one quarter of those have undergone modifications. The report also says that according to the Renewable Fuels Association, 63,000 DOT 111 wagons carry ethanol in the U.S. and most have received no modifications.

Arguments are made by some, including in the environmental movement, that the vast fleet should be replaced with double-hulled wagons. Rail companies have resisted that call for many years because of the cost involved (according to some news sources, more than \$1 billion). Meanwhile, the U.S. and Canadian governments have bowed to industry pressure to not legislate on the matter.

Since Lac Mégantic, the opposition New Democratic Party in Ottawa has focused its critique of oil train movement on calls for greater safety measures. MP Olivia Chow accuses the federal government of only making vague promises to improve rail safety. She says train and rail line inspections need to be increased and automatic braking systems should be required on all trains. Coincidentally, CBC News is reporting that Transportation Safety Board inspectors say a malfunctioning of an automatic brake system may have caused the Gainford crash.

NDP MP for Edmonton Strathcona [Linda Duncan says](#), “I want this rail shipping to be slowed down until we get a real picture of how safe it is.” She reportedly owns a cabin at Wabamun Lake, near where the 2005 CN derailment occurred.

Regardless of the safety record, the profits in railway operations are impressive. CN Rail’s financial results for the third quarter of 2013 were issued on October 23 and they show record revenues of \$2.7 billion and net profit of \$705 million, up from \$664 million in the same quarter a year ago. The other half of Canada’s railway duopoly, CP Rail, is also reporting a record share price and profits – \$331 million in the same quarter, on earnings of \$1.5 billion. Both railways have extensive operations in the U.S. and are cashing in on the oil-by-rail boom.

Extends Into the North

The threat of oil trains extends into Canada’s north. There is intense commercial pressure to open Arctic waters for fossil fuel extraction and transport. Meanwhile, Denver-based Omnitrax has come up with a scheme to ship oil from the Bakken field in North Dakota and Saskatchewan along the old, former CN-owned line to Churchill, Manitoba, on Hudson Bay. A new export terminal would be built, and from there the product would be transported by oil tanker through sub-Arctic waters to the Atlantic Ocean.

Omnitrax owns the 1,300 km of line that connects The Pas, Manitoba to Churchill. Much of the line is overtop of permafrost peat that is [beginning to break down due to global warming](#). The company’s oil-by-rail proposal has met a cool reception from the NDP government of Manitoba and was hotly contested at recent [town hall meetings](#) in three locales in the province.

But this bizarre rail scheme would fit with the 'vision' that Canada's Conservative government has been pushing for the Canadian north and Arctic ever since it first came to power in 2006. That is to open up the vast and fragile region to fossil fuel and mineral extraction, and to open Arctic waters for ocean transport. Fittingly, and in a dire premonition of the fate of the Arctic Ocean, the first traversing of the Northwest Passage by a cargo ship occurred last month, consisting of a load of coal mined in BC and bound for Denmark.

The government has a unique opening to advance its vision by virtue of its chairmanship for the next two years of the eight-country Arctic Council. It says it will use its two years at the helm of the organization to push for "resource" development. The Council began a three-day meeting on October 21 in Whitehorse, Yukon and its new chairperson, Environment Minister and Nunavut MP Leona Aglukkaq, says, "Our overarching theme for Canada's chairmanship is development for the people of the North." For her, that means "development" of natural resources, "safe shipping" through Arctic waters and "sustainable communities" whose livelihoods and social services will become dependent on resource extraction revenues.

This vision is sharply opposed by most of the Aboriginal peoples of the Arctic and sub-Arctic. Five months ago, [an historic statement](#) signed by most of the Aboriginal peoples who live there was signed in Sweden. It calls for a moratorium on oil drilling and other exploration activity in the Arctic and says any resource extraction should be conditional upon Aboriginal consent. The statement was signed by two of the six permanent members of the Arctic Council – the Arctic Athabaskan Council and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North.

At the time, Aglukkaq expressed "disappointment" with the statement. Her government's Aboriginal business allies in the North challenged the legitimacy of the Inuit signatories.

In a surprising and revealing development at the meeting in Whitehorse, senior U.S. official for Arctic affairs, Julia Gourley, says she is concerned that the Canadian government may be diminishing the importance of scientific research in the Arctic. "Certainly, the United States would never allow any threats to science work at the council, so we would defend it. That might be something that's a little different between Canada and the U.S. ..."

She also says her government opposes opening the Northwest Passage to commercial shipping unless and until an international agreement is reached. Canada claims sovereignty over those waters.

A representative of the Arctic Athabaskan Council at the meeting, Chief Gary Harrison of the Chickaloon Village Athabaskan Nation in Alaska, is concerned about the Council's focus on responsible resource development, [reports the Globe and Mail](#). "Resource extraction is not development," he said. He doesn't want the council to evolve "from an environmental body to an extractive body."

Member countries of the Arctic Council are Canada, the United States, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Fossil Fuel Opponents Score Victories

The latest train derailment in Alberta is a blow to the fossil fuel agenda of the federal government and fossil fuel industry, joining with other recent setbacks they have suffered.

In New Brunswick, the anti-natural gas fracking movement in the province has emerged strengthened following a [violent assault](#) against it by the RCMP on October 17. On that day, the federal police force attacked a weeks-long protest against exploratory drilling and seismic testing being conducted by a Houston-based company contracted by the province's Irving Oil conglomerate.

The attack completely backfired. Within hours, large protests in solidarity with the movement erupted across Canada, in the United States and further internationally. Protests actions at the site continued in the days following, and a community-wide consultation on October 20 drew hundreds of people. The exploratory testing has been halted and pressure is now stronger than ever on the Conservative Party government of the province to declare a moratorium.

Similar problems for the industry were encountered by Enbridge Inc in Montreal and Toronto during recent hearings of the National Energy Board into the company's proposal to begin shipping Alberta crude oil and tar sands bitumen through its existing Line 9 pipeline across southern Ontario to Montreal. The last day of the hearings in Toronto on October 19 where Enbridge was to present its concluding remarks ended abruptly when the company bolted for the doors rather than [face its critics](#).

With questions surrounding oil transport by rail, gas fracking, Arctic development and the safety of the Enbridge Line 9 pipeline, it has been a difficult time for the fossil fuel industry. But as Canada tries to accelerate its natural resources development under Prime Minister Harper's economic plan, more negative publicity can be expected. Public outcry is growing. Can it derail the madcap rush into expanding fossil fuel extraction fast enough to make a real difference to the looming climate dangers that scientists are warning against? •

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