

Will Lac-Megantic be Railroading's 9/11?

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Reflect for a moment upon how 9/11 has changed our daily lives. At huge cost and expense, public and private, Americans are now subjected to mindless “security” procedures, often performed by low-skilled, poorly trained, and poorly-supervised personnel whose ostensible duty is to “protect” us from unseen, and largely absent, perpetrators of mass violence. Granted, we have been spared another event such as the 2001 New York and Washington disasters, but the reason for our good record, so far, has had less to do with showing photo IDs, and more, everywhere we go than to the good work of a much smaller number of professionals in national security agencies. Clearly, the nation over-reacted after 9/11. Will railroads now be saddled with some of the same nonsense as result of the Lac-Megantic rail disaster? Probably so!

The railroad “industry” in North America (private and public) is so much safer than when this writer entered it in 1955. Granted, there is less of it, but for the most part what remains is well maintained, well operated and very SAFE. That said, railroads are vulnerable. We cannot think of a major industrial-type enterprise where more employees report for duty and leave the premises with less face-to-face supervision. U.S. railroading involves a 150,000+ mile “production line”, operating 24-hours per day, 365-days-per-year. 99 9/10 % of the time operating personnel show up at the right place, on-time, in good shape, take their duties seriously, do as they are supposed to do, and go home, many without seeing supervision each and every day. Failures are very rare, but still possible.

Much has been made of the Montreal, Maine & Atlantic’s one-person train/engine crew. Arguably, that is cutting it a bit close, given the nature of the cargo and the size of the train, but I have observed one-person crewing in Switzerland, where the driver (train engineer if you will), ran the train, off-loaded cargo, re-boarded and left town, albeit with a small train compared with 72 carloads of crude oil. As a former railroader, I am unmoved by the calls for larger crews than required (again, I would not feel comfortable with one person on a 72-car oil train *absent other potentially-available safeguards*). In fact, I was once a crew member on a light engine, with five guys talking in the locomotive cab, when we derailed by running over a derail (a low-tech safety device) in clear daylight with unobstructed view. Fortunately, I was not running the engine, but my participation in distracting “social talk” was without question a contributing factor.

Other questions need to be asked: How can it be that a financially struggling “short-line” railroad, such as the MM&A, can’t make it when they operate with one-person crews, whereas it would take several hundred truckers to do the same transport job were the cargo on the highway? Despite the closing of paper mills in northern Maine, we have not heard of any public highways being abandoned, nor of highway maintenance being curtailed. If it is the desire of public policy-makers to retain and encourage cargo

transport by rail, more states are going to have to step up by purchasing marginal rail lines at risk of abandonment, and by investing in new rail infrastructure. Then, private operators, such as the MM&A, will be less tempted to cut corners. # # # #