

Eric Hansen:

Weyauwega train disaster still resonates

MILWAUKEE — A ferocious explosion and fireball followed a Wisconsin Central train wreck in the frigid pre-dawn hours of March 4, 1996, in Weyauwega, about 100 miles northeast of Madison in Waupaca County.

Two thousand citizens, many fleeing without pets or medications, evacuated for 18 days as the fires burned.

Authorities feared additional explosions that would catapult shrapnel a mile or more from the derailed propane tank cars. Gas lines were shut off. Water pipes froze in unheated houses.

Four days after the initial explosion, Wisconsin National Guard armored personnel carriers transported residents into the danger zone to rescue their pets. Wearing helmets and flak jackets, the evacuees dashed into their abandoned homes to retrieve hungry dogs, cats and parakeets.

Ever so slowly, specialists drained the railroad tank cars of their volatile cargo, and Weyauwega pulled back from the brink.

Federal investigators blamed a cracked rail and deficient track maintenance for the derailment.

Friday was the 20th anniversary of the Weyauwega catastrophe. Unfortunately, railroad track failures remain a concern today, greatly magnified by massive increases in explosive crude oil train traffic in recent years.

Wisconsin is now one of the busiest routes in the nation for this dangerous cargo. Wisconsin is part of a nationwide surge from 9,500 railroad tank car loads of crude oil in 2008 to 407,761 in 2013.

Connect the dots on the systemic danger the oil trains bring — and the details of the Weyauwega incident — and a reasonable citizen would question whether a Weyauwega scale disaster, or worse, is looming.

Key points: Highly explosive crude oil from North Dakota is traveling in tank cars that are aging and were never designed with this kind of volatile cargo in mind. In addition, the sheer weight of mile-long oil trains stresses railroad tracks and aging bridges.

Those concerns grew when a Canadian government investigation into the oil train explosion that killed 47 people in Lac Megantic, Quebec, on July 6, 2013, traced that fatal train's path. The train had traveled through La Crosse, Columbus, and Milwaukee on Canadian Pacific tracks before exploding in Quebec.



STEVE APPS -- State Journal archives

Railroad cars carrying a million pounds of propane derailed in March of 1996 in Weyauwega. One of the cars exploded, flames shot 200 feet into the air, and the entire city had to be evacuated.

As knowledge of the dangers of oil train traffic spread, something else became clear: a lack of transparency on the part of the railroads.

Milwaukee citizens, local elected officials and journalists sought to obtain safety inspection reports for the corroded, century-old 1st St. railroad bridge in the city. Canadian Pacific railroad officials refused to share the inspection reports for half a year.

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Director Sarah Feinberg announced a program to obtain bridge safety reports on February 19, 2016, indicating that some progress is at hand.

Bridge inspection reports are only the tip of the iceberg though. Railroads are not sharing information on what levels of insurance they carry, their plans for a worst-case scenario, or how they make critical routing decisions that bring oil trains through densely populated areas.

Any illusion that federal regulators are exercising effective due diligence on oil train traffic faded when the Department of Transportation released an audit of the FRA on Feb. 26.

That report's opening words cite the Lac Megantic disaster and the vast increase in crude oil train traffic. However, the audit summarizes FRA's overview of oil train traffic as dysfunctional and lacking analysis on the impact to towns, cities and major population areas. It also notes a lack of criminal penalties for safety violations.

When citizens push, governments move into action. Insist that your elected representatives take effective action to protect our communities from dangerous crude oil train traffic.

Eric Hansen, of Milwaukee, is an outdoor writer and a member of Citizens Acting for Rail Safety — Milwaukee Area: ehansen@wi.rr.com. He will speak at a March 12 forum on the topic in Milwaukee.

