

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph C. Szabo
Prepared Remarks
49th Meeting of the Railroad Safety Advisory Committee
Emergency Meeting
August 29, 2013
Washington, D.C.

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for gathering on such short notice.

The fact that we've called the first Emergency Meeting of RSAC in 17 years speaks very clearly to the important job ahead.

And let me start off by saying something I strongly believe: No other group is more qualified – or more capable – of taking on this job than you.

Our discussion today will focus on how we can further reduce risk in our complex, interconnected rail system – and in the process strengthen the safe transportation of hazardous materials by rail.

And to be clear, the purpose of our discussion is to set the table for acting decisively, for acting effectively, and for ultimately succeeding in ensuring continuous safety improvement.

For me, the full weight of what happened in Lac-Megantic hit home once I saw pictures.

I thought to myself: that could have been my town.

As some of you may know, I used to be mayor of Riverdale, Illinois – a major rail town with two large rail yards and five railroads slicing through it.

Over the years, we had our share of rail accidents and hazardous spills in Riverdale. But, I can only imagine the emotional toll and economic recovery effort that the mayor and citizens of Lac-Megantic now face.

So I am very grateful that Transport Canada's Director General for Rail Safety – Luc Burdon – is able to be here today, and to give us a presentation on this tragic accident.

At our last meeting, I described the RSAC as a true cross section of the rail industry.

And one reason the RSAC has achieved so much in the past 17 years is because its members are committed to working together to advance rail safety – and to making decisions by consensus.

Transport Canada – as an Associate Member – is an essential contributor to all of our discussions.

But in particular, given the reasons we've called this Emergency Meeting, it is so important that we're able to learn from Director General Burdon and Transport Canada this morning.

The reality is, every day, trains pass through towns throughout the United States and Canada carrying goods that are essential to modern life.

Trains connect our economy. They move our Nation forward. And overall, rail is an extremely safe mode of transportation.

Out of 2.47 million shipments of hazardous materials by rail in 2012, less than a fraction of one percent resulted in any type of release.

2012 – by virtually all measures – was the safest year in railroading history. And in the past 10 years, train accidents are down a remarkable 43 percent.

But when lives are lost, when families are broken, when a town is nearly wiped out, this is a reminder that our job – when it comes to safety – is never done.

It becomes our duty to take a hard look at what happened – to understand where additional risk remains in our rail system – and to look for those ways we can spare other towns from similar tragedies.

This is why we are here today.

Although safety is trending in a very positive direction in the United States, in recent years we have seen some very serious accidents.

Towns like Plevna in Montana, Columbus and Arcadia in Ohio, and Tiskilwa and Cherry Valley in Illinois, are all places where trains loaded with ethanol have derailed since 2009: resulting in one death, injuries, fires, evacuations, and significant damage to property and the environment.

Or consider what happened in 2005 in Graniteville, South Carolina, where a collision caused three cars carrying chlorine to derail and rupture. That accident resulted in 9 deaths, more than 5,000 people being evacuated, and a total accident cost of \$126 million.

We learn from every accident. And we apply what we learn towards strengthening our safety program to ensure continuous safety improvement.

Now, the investigation into the accident in Quebec is still unfolding. But from what we know so far, we understand the tremendous potential for damage when trains are not properly secured and attended.

That's why, earlier this month, we issued an Emergency Order outlining additional steps railroads must take to prevent trains on mainline tracks and sidings from moving unintentionally.

These steps are mandatory. And failure to comply will result in enforcement actions.

Today we need to discuss how we make these provisions permanent.

We also issued a Safety Advisory with the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration that includes a detailed list of safety recommendations we expect railroads to follow – and that also frames today's discussion.

And in the next few weeks, FRA plans to begin tracking industry compliance with both our Emergency Order and Safety Advisory on our website so the public can have full transparency.

Today is about looking at some of the critical safety areas where we must make improvement.

Everyone here is likely familiar with the Swiss Cheese Accident Model. You have a stack of Swiss Cheese – and the holes in each slice represent risk factors.

Accidents happen in the rare event when the holes – or risk factors – line up. Redundancy – or those extra slices of cheese with smaller holes – eliminate risk and further our goal of continuous safety improvement. So we need the RSAC to help us identify where these risk factors are and how we can proactively address them to prevent accidents.

As we begin this process, it is important to recognize that regulations governing the securement of unattended trains have been in place for more than a decade. And we know that these regulations – when followed – substantially reduce risk.

But we must always do better. We must be certain that the processes and procedures currently in place are in line with both our regulations and our Emergency Order.

We must be certain that the railroads' trainers and testers fully understand our regulations and that they are fully trained in conducting tests. And, we must be certain that railroad employees fully understand their securement responsibilities: from applying the correct number of handbrakes, to properly evaluating other risk factors such as terrain and weather – and are given enough time to properly execute these duties.

Another important topic the RSAC will begin to discuss today involves crew size.

To be clear, FRA believes safety is enhanced through multiple person crews and we must have an adult conversation on how coordination and interaction among multiple crew members reduces risk from our rail system.

But, it is critical that this be viewed from a safety perspective and not be viewed as a job security measure or from a one-size-fits all approach.

This is about understanding the nuance of railroad operations, identifying where risks exist in the system, and then eliminating those risks.

We owe the public our willingness to work together and to face these challenges head on.

And the RSAC's list of accomplishments – over 17 years – is proof you are ready to take on this very important task.

RSAC's achievements are a big part of why railroad safety is trending in such a positive direction – and why industry professionalism is rising to even higher levels.

So today, the RSAC – just as it has so many times in the past – will commit to working together to advance rail safety.

You've done it before.

Now you must do it again.

And I have no doubt that – together – we will achieve results to benefit the public.

Let's get to work.