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Feds order oil train cars with leaky valves pulled for repair

[Becky Kramer](#) The Spokesman-Review

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A leaking oil train that traveled across Washington and Idaho in January had tank cars with flawed valves, which are also installed in thousands of other tank cars nationwide, federal investigators said.

The Federal Railroad Administration investigated the valves after a BNSF train hauling North Dakota crude oil to a Washington refinery had to have 14 cars with slow leaks removed from the 100-car train.

The first leak was discovered Jan. 12, when crew members spotted an oil sheen on the side of a single tank car at the Hauser refueling depot about 20 miles east of Spokane. An additional 13 tank cars were found to be leaking and were removed during stops in Vancouver and in Auburn, south of Seattle. Two more leaking cars were discovered after the train arrived at the Anacortes refinery.

Less than 25 gallons of crude oil was released through the valves on the top of the cars, according to BNSF Railway.

Another tank car with a leaking valve was discovered at a BNSF rail yard Jan. 15 in Denver. That car was carrying flammable mineral spirits.

The Federal Railroad Administration conducted tests on the valves sold by McKenzie Valve and Machining of Tennessee, concluding that a design flaw created problems with the seal. In late March, the agency issued a directive to tank car owners to replace the valves, which officials described as an "immediate safety issue." The tank cars can't be used until replacement valves are installed.

About 6,000 tank cars nationwide are equipped with the faulty valves, according to the Railroad Administration's estimates.

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4 oil train accidents occurred this year in U.S., Canada



Associated Press photo

Crew members walk near the scene of a train derailment Feb. 17 near Mount Carbon, W.Va.

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Sweeping regulations to boost the safety of trains transporting crude oil, ethanol and other flammable liquids were announced Friday by U.S. and Canadian officials.

The long-awaited regulations are a response to a series of oil train accidents in both countries. The worst came on July 5, 2013, when a runaway Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway train that had been left unattended derailed, spilling oil and catching fire inside the town of Lac-Megantic in Quebec. Forty-seven people were killed and 30 buildings burned in the town's center. About 1.6 million gallons of oil was spilled.

Here are accidents that have occurred this year:

- **Feb. 14, 2015:** A 100-car Canadian National Railway train hauling crude oil and petroleum distillates derailed in a remote part of Ontario, Canada. The blaze it ignited burned for days.
- **Feb. 16, 2015:** A 109-car CSX oil train derailed and caught fire near Mount Carbon, West Virginia, leaking oil into a Kanawha River tributary and burning a house to its foundation. The blaze burned for most of week.
- **March 10, 2015:** 21 cars of a 105-car Burlington Northern-Santa Fe train hauling oil from the Bakken region of North Dakota derailed about 3 miles outside Galena, Illinois, a town of about 3,000 in the state's northwest corner.
- **March 7, 2015:** A 94-car Canadian National Railway crude oil train derailed about 3 miles outside the Northern Ontario town of Gogama. The resulting fire destroyed a bridge. The accident was only 23 miles from the Feb. 14 derailment.

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U.S., Canada unveil rules to boost oil train safety

Joan Lowy Associated Press

WASHINGTON – Rail tank cars used to transport crude oil and many other flammable liquids will have to be built to stronger standards to reduce the risk of a catastrophic train crash and fire, under sweeping new safety rules unveiled Friday by U.S. and Canadian transportation officials.

The regulations are a long-awaited response to a series of fiery train crashes in the U.S. and Canada, including four so far this year.

Under the rules, new tank cars carrying the most volatile liquids, including crude oil and ethanol, must have an outer shell, a thermal lining to withstand fire, improved valves and thicker, 9/16ths-inch steel walls to keep them from rupturing.

For the crude oil fleet, more than 16,000 of the oldest tank cars, known as DOT-111s, would have to be phased out or retrofitted in the U.S. and Canada by 2018. By 2020, an additional 27,000 cars primarily used for crude would need to be upgraded.

For the ethanol fleet, retrofits for almost 20,000 DOT-111s would have to be completed by May 2023. All remaining cars used to haul hazardous flammable liquids would need retrofits or replacement by 2025.

Defending the timetable, U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said officials took into account how long it will take manufacturers to produce tank cars to the new standard.

“This is a schedule we believe is workable; it’s aggressive,” he said. “If you talk to some of the manufacturers who are going to have to do the work, it’s more aggressive than they would like.” The deadlines drew criticism from safety advocates and some members of Congress, who said they would leave dangerous cars on the tracks for too long. Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, where crude-by-rail traffic is expected to sharply increase in coming years, added that Friday’s announcement did not address the high volatility of crude originating in the Bakken region of North Dakota, Montana and Canada.

“We’re seeing these explosions that even first responders can’t respond to adequately,” Cantwell said.

Trains of at least 70 cars that have at least one car containing the most volatile class of liquids also must have electronically controlled brakes that automatically stop all the cars in a train at the same time, instead of sequentially. The braking requirement goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2021. But it will be extended to all flammable-liquid trains after 2023.

Officials estimated the cost of the regulations at \$2.5 billion.

The American Petroleum Institute said Friday the timeline for tank car retrofits was too short and doesn’t recognize limits on shop capacity available to get the work done.

Railroads had fought the new braking requirements, saying they will provide little or no added safety benefit.

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