

Beat: Travel

U.S. orders emergency safety measures after Quebec train disaster

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USPA News - The U.S. government on late Friday issued an emergency order requiring all railroads to implement a series of safety measures to help prevent unattended trains from moving unintentionally, which occurred in Canada last month and resulted in nearly 50 people being killed. The order was issued to require railroads operating on the general system to immediately implement additional processes and procedures to ensure that certain unattended trains on mainline tracks and mainline siding outside of a yard or terminal are properly secured against unintended movement.

The half-dozen measures in the order are a direct result of a U.S. investigation into the circumstances that caused a catastrophic derailment in the center of Lac-Mégantic in the Canadian province of Quebec. A total of 47 people were killed when an unattended 73-car freight train carrying crude oil ran away and derailed, causing an enormous fire and explosion that wiped out half of the town's center. "The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) re-examined its regulations governing the securement of such equipment in light of the July 6, 2013, derailment in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, Canada, which demonstrated the terrible consequences that can arise when a railroad accident results in a sudden release of flammable liquids," FRA Administrator Joseph Szabo wrote in the emergency order. Szabo said its investigation found significant non-compliance with FRA's securement regulations, with nearly 5,000 recorded violations since January 2010. "These factors lead FRA to the conclusion that additional action is necessary to eliminate an immediate hazard of death, personal injury, or significant harm to the environment, particularly in instances where certain hazardous materials are involved," he said. Friday's order bans trains transporting certain types and quantities of hazardous materials from being left unattended on a mainline track or mainline siding outside of a yard or terminal until the railroad develops an approved plan that identifies specific locations and circumstances when such trains may be left unattended. If a plan has been approved, railroads will be required to implement certain processes, such as locking the cab of the controlling locomotive or removing and securing the locomotive's reverser. Train drivers will also be required to communicate details about their cargo, the terrain and relevant weather information to train dispatchers, after which train dispatchers are required to ask the train crew whether the securement meets safety requirements. The order further directs railroads to review and verify, and adjust if necessary, existing procedures and processes which relate to the number of hand brakes that are applied on unattended trains. Railroads will also be required to brief new employees about the processes relating to securement if their job may require them to perform such duties. The fifth safety measure requires railroads to develop procedures to ensure that a qualified railroad employee inspects all equipment that any emergency responder has been on, under, or between before the train is left unattended. The sixth measure requires railroads to provide a copy of the emergency order to all affected employees. Szabo described the transportation of hazardous materials by rail as "extremely safe," but said the Canadian rail disaster demonstrates the substantial potential for danger that exists when an unattended train rolls away and derailed. "Although the Lac-Mégantic occurred in Canada, the freight railroad operating environment in Canada is similar to that in the United States, and a number of railroads operate in both countries," he said. The Lac-Mégantic derailment was Canada's worst railway disaster since June 1864, when a passenger train carrying mostly German and Polish immigrants failed to acknowledge a stop signal and fell through an open swing bridge near Mont-Saint-Hilaire in Quebec, killing 99 people and injuring around 100 others.

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