

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Rail Safety Press Conference

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

May 22nd, 2023

[\[VIDEO\]](#) (Sen. Cantwell at 28:01)

Sen. Cantwell: Well I want to thank all of the speakers. Thank you for telling this story so effectively and why we need this legislation to pass. I want to thank the city of Seattle and Battalion Chief Andy Collins for hosting us today.

It wasn't long after the Lac-Mégantic accident that we came here to talk about rail safety legislation that we introduced. A few things we got done, but many of the provisions from that original legislation are now in this bill, with the hopes that we will get it passed soon.

We're here because we finally have a strong bipartisan effort that could help us prevent disasters in the future. And we want to see it on the Senate floor. With derailments in our state on the rise and with the accident we saw in East Palestine it's time to pass national rail safety improvement.

This rail bill that is awaiting action, I think in the next few weeks does three important things.

One, it mandates rail technology detection, that can warn the railroad team of impending rail car failures. This is so important and as was mentioned, we make sure that inspections have enough time to be done and done appropriately.

It requires hazardous explosive materials like vinyl chloride that we saw in East Palestine to be met with certain regulations like slowing down the speed of the train and having an adequate emergency response plan.

And it requires that rail cars meet higher structural standards by 2027.

For the first time, it requires the railroads to use the [defect detection] technologies that could have prevented East Palestine from happening, because it would be a requirement. And it gives the Department of Transportation the ability to have the appropriate spacing of this technology.

It ensures that trains carrying flammable gases like vinyl chloride and other explosive materials have to comply with strict safety standards, regulating them as I said on speed and improving the emergency response. Vinyl chloride did not have to meet this requirement before and that is why so many people were surprised to even find it on the train in East Palestine.

It prevents railroads from rushing an inspection when it is so important to have, as we just heard from the two gentlemen, properly trained people who know what inspecting a rail car is all about, and what important aspects of the locomotive (inspection) have to take place. Including, as was described in that previous accident, why two people are involved. The bill

prevents railroads from reducing the number of those people operating on the train to just one person without ensuring safety. We think this is the appropriate step and making sure that we have a workforce (when) these trains fly through our communities that this is what is required to keep us safe.

This legislation also increases the penalty for violating rail safety laws to \$10 million.

It improves emergency response by requiring railroads to inform the states about the hazardous material and to make sure that they understand what it will take to deal with that material. Previously, these requirements were (only) there for crude by rail. So making sure that important substances like vinyl chloride or other hazardous materials have a real plan so that the battalion chief and the communities can make a plan for them is so important.

It does, as was mentioned by our first responders, include the opportunity for training and personal protective equipment. It allows DOT to quickly reimburse responders who respond to hazardous materials derailment, something we saw in East Palestine or any time that we have an emergency accident here.

Sometimes there are issues about whether people are going to be reimbursed and we want people when they're dealing with a hazard to know that help is on the way.

Over the past decade, as mentioned, the amount of crude shipped by rail through our state has increased over 180% to 1.4 billion gallons annually. And at the same time Class I train derailments in the State of Washington have doubled.

Rail transport needs to be safer. Our trains need to be safer, and they need to be safer in our population centers like here in Seattle and Tacoma, but also in places like Pasco or Yakima.

Even if a train isn't carrying crude oil, derailments still have the potential to cause harm. For instance, in March a BNSF train derailed on (the) Swinomish Reservation along Padilla Bay waterfront and spilled over 3000 gallons of fuel just a few yards away from a sensitive aquatic system. I think in this case, it was the locomotive is that right? So, they didn't even have to be transporting oil, just the accident of the train itself could expose a community and in this case, a very special part of our state, to having gallons of fuel into a sensitive aqua ecosystem.

Rail transportation is critical to our state. And we need to continue to do everything we can to make sure an East Palestine incident doesn't happen here in Washington. We know that we can't just rely on the railroads to voluntarily do this. We need to make our communities safe by passing the Railway Safety Act and making sure that safety is mandatory, and making sure that we have learned our lessons and improved the transport of this material. Thank you all very much.