 Chicago Greens

**Press Release** December 27, 2014 **www.illinoisgreens.org**

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Increased Demand for Shipping Oil by Rail

Oil Tanks Cars Pose Threat to Region

Whereas Chicago serves as the rail capital of the nation, with an average 500 trains passing through Illinois each day, the Chicago Greens are concerned about the threat posed to communities by the increased number of tanks cars transporting oil passing through the area.  Tanks cars have a plate thickness of only 7⁄16 inch, and each car has a maximum capacity of carrying 34,500 US gallons of oil.  Chicago handles one-fourth of the nation's freight rail traffic, each day handling 37,500 railcars.

Much of the oil is being hauled by an old fleet of some 78,000 tank cars that are prone to split during accidents. Older cars lack puncture-resistant steel jackets, thermal insulation, and heavy steel shields.  In a fire, the blanket helps prevent oil in tank cars that have not ruptured from overheating and exploding.

Rail shipments of crude oil have grown from a few thousand carloads a decade ago to 434,000 carloads last year.

The state is served by 47 common freight carrier railroads, and 10 private freight carriers.  Cars may be changed at any of the 21 yards in the metropolitan area.  There are at least 25 major "junctions" where trains headed in different directions, on different railroads, will regularly meet or encounter one another.  In addition, 760 passenger trains pass through the region every day. Freight trains spend an average of 30 hours traversing the Chicago region.   There is no legal limit to the length of train, which is usually limited only by the length that will fit in a siding.  "Helper" engines can be added at the rear of a train, and enable increasing the length.  Super freight trains, although not common, can extend about 3 1/2 miles.  The train in the Lac-Mégantic derailment was made up of 72 cars.

Railroads are trying to meet the increased demand for shipping oil.  BNSF Railway, the industry’s largest transporter of crude oil, announced in 2014 plans to purchase its own fleet of up to 5,000 crude oil tank cars, stating that these will be built to safety standards exceeding the hazmat standards.  Typically, railroads don’t own the tank cars they pull.

The oil industry maintains that proposed federal rules to make hauling crude oil by rail safer and avoid fiery wrecks would drive up costs, and put the U.S. energy revival at risk.

The American Petroleum Institute, joined by the Association of American Railroads, recently proposed keeping older tank cars, which investigators say are vulnerable to puncture, in service for twice as long as envisioned by regulators drafting rules for carrying flammable liquids like oil on trains.

The oil and railroad industries are urging federal regulators to allow them as long as seven years to upgrade existing tank cars.

The Chicago Greens are continuing to press members of the Illinois delegation to Congress to address the issue of increased oil train traffic in the region, and the apparent reluctance to acknowledge the potential hazards to communities situated along rail routes.