

Derailment shows value in alternate line

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The train line that runs north and south along Route 126 has many homes and businesses that are very close to the tracks, as shown here in Cole Branch.

Photo: RON WARD/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

The fiery train derailment that has blocked the main freight line through western New Brunswick underscores the value of having an alternative north-south rail line through the east side of the province, a rail lobby group and Premier David Alward say.

However, that eastern line is under threat because its owner, CN Rail, wants an injection of public money within months in order to upgrade it and keep the line open.

“We’ve said from square one that we are working to ensure that it is secured,” Alward said Friday of the rail line that travels from Moncton through Miramichi to Campbellton and on which CN only rarely transports freight, using its western line for freight traffic.

That eastern line is “vital” for industries in northern New Brunswick, Alward said, stressing that is the main reason why the province, industry and CN are in talks to save it from the scrap heap.

CN says the eastern line is a money loser, and without a cash infusion, it will run all of its freight operations on the western north-south rail route, which runs through Edmundston before heading south through the western part of the province. That could spell the end of rail freight service for industries in the northeast of the province, from lumbering to mining to heavy manufacturing. It is that western line on which a freight train derailment on Tuesday led to a raging fire from ruptured propane cars, closing the line indefinitely near Plaster Rock.

There is no word when trains will be back on those tracks. Freight trains are using the eastern line in the meantime, but trains can only move very slowly on much of that eastern line due to the poor condition of the rails, rail bed and some rail bridges.

Ted Bartlett of transportation lobby group Transport Action Atlantic hopes that if anything good can come from such a bad rail accident, it is that CN will see the value to the company of having an alternative rail freight route through the province.

“Maybe this will give CN pause,” Bartlett said in Ottawa when reached by phone aboard a Via Rail train, bound for his Metro Moncton home.

“It’s always nice to have a back-up.”

CN says it will quit the so-called Newcastle Subdivision line this year if it doesn’t receive a \$50-million infusion.

Alward, Bartlett and a coalition of northern mayors who are all working to save line believe the track can be saved and improved for “significantly less” than that, Alward said, though the exact figure would depend on the ultimate arrangement between government, industry and the rail company, should one be reached.

Transport Action Atlantic will be releasing a study later this month done by an independent consultant into ways to salvage the line. Bartlett says the paper will show that the key eastern line can be not only saved but bolstered for less than \$50 million because their study assumes that lofty figure includes a profit for CN which would do the work involved in bringing that line up to a higher standard.

Currently, trains including even passenger rail service – which involves shorter and far less heavy trains – must travel at a greatly reduced speed of about 40 kilometres per hour along a very lengthy portion of the line between Rogersville and Bathurst, until its aging rails and rail beds can be upgraded.

There are other issues with that eastern line, Bartlett noted, for example, very few places where trains can pull off and let other trains pass on the single line.

With all rail freight between the Port of Halifax, Moncton and points west – often hundreds of containers per day – now having to use a slower line shared with Via Rail and other oncoming freight trains, the dearth of side tracks could prove the source of further delays while the mess on the western line is cleaned up, Bartlett noted.

Acadie-Bathurst NDP MP Yvon Godin has also been fighting to save the eastern rail line as a key link between industries in the north of the province and export points south and west, but also because if that line goes, Via Rail passenger service to the northeast will end with it.

He agreed the line has proven its worth over the past century but especially since Tuesday's derailment.

“If you want to do economic development somewhere, you would fight to have a rail line going to your place,” Godin said.

“CN should say, ‘We are lucky to have that line.’”

Godin believes CN should foot the bill for upgrading the eastern line, but if not, the Conservative governments in both Ottawa and Fredericton should each chip in as much as one-third of the costs, in his opinion.

Bartlett realizes CN is a business and is unlikely to run a rail line at a loss, and his group isn't necessarily opposed to putting public money into a private company given the rail line's importance – as long as taxpayers receive an ownership stake like any other investor.

“Our report, which we hope to release later this month, will deliver that point in greater detail,” he said.