Too few follow-ups to ensure rail safety, according to the Auditor General of Canada

Journal of Montreal

Almost eight years after the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster, the Auditor General of Canada believes that Transport Canada is delaying in implementing all the recommendations made in 2013.

More specifically, the department would not be in a position to ensure that the improvements in rail surveillance bear fruit.

The problem, according to Auditor General (AG) Karen Hogan, is mainly due to the fact that the Ministry of Transport has not established a monitoring system rigorous enough to properly measure the impact of its measures.

“We found that Transport Canada did not measure the overall effectiveness of its rail safety oversight activities. The Ministry had not determined whether rail safety had improved through its inspections and audits of safety management systems, ”it wrote in a report released Thursday.

The VG noted, however, that "significant improvements" in monitoring have been made. The problem lies more in the evaluation of the effectiveness of this surveillance.

In this sense, the VG recommends in particular to urge the railway companies to provide more evidence and more information related to safety.

In addition, the report notes that between 2017 and 2018, the amount of crude oil and fuel oil transported by rail jumped by more than 45%. "This increase in rail traffic causes wear and tear on the tracks, which can present additional safety risks," it was indicated.

Combined with this is an increase in developed land near railways and in urban areas which VG believes increases safety risks for motorists and pedestrians.

"Because of all of these factors, it is more important than ever that Transport Canada, railways and other stakeholders work together to make rail transportation as safe as possible for all Canadians." , she says.

The Conservative Party, through the MP for Mégantic-L'Érable, Luc Berthold, said it was "extremely disappointed" by the revelations made by the VG.

“The Auditor General reveals that Transport Canada has not measured the effectiveness of rail safety management systems. We inspect more, but we do nothing to ensure that the deficiencies are corrected, ”said Luc Berthold, by press release.

He added that the previous Minister of Transport, Marc Garneau, "failed" to make rail safety a priority as he had committed to. "I invite the new Minister of Transport [Omar Alghabra] to do better, faster, and to ensure that this time, this report does not remain unanswered," added the elected Conservative.

For his part, the Quebec Minister of Transport, François Bonnardel, said by e-mail that the Legault government is worried "to note that there are still improvements to be made to rail safety. For the people of Mégantic and for all Quebecers, the federal government has a duty to take the recommendations of the Auditor General of Canada seriously and to act on them quickly ”.

Finally, the Coalition of Citizens and Organizations Committed to Rail Safety spoke of a “failure” to the TVA Nouvelles camera on Thursday. “Minister Garneau, when he was appointed, his first commitment was to improve rail safety in Canada. Unfortunately, eight years later after the Lac-Mégantic tragedy, we see that there has been no improvement, ”said spokesperson Robert Bellefleur.