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DOT Proposal Revolutionizes Rail Hazmat Tank Car Safety, Improves Puncture Resistance, Limits Speed, and Phases Out Oldest From Most Toxic Service

The safety of rail tank cars that carry the most dangerous hazardous materials will be dramatically improved under the most sweeping and revolutionary proposal in decades, announced U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary E. Peters.

“This proposal is designed to significantly reduce the hazard of hauling hazardous materials by rail,” Peters said, explaining the performance-based standard will increase by 500 percent on average the amount of energy the tank car must absorb during a train accident before a catastrophic failure may occur.

The proposal requires tank cars carrying Poison Inhalation Hazard (PIH) commodities such as chlorine and anhydrous ammonia to be equipped with puncture-resistance protection strong enough to prevent penetration at speeds of 25 mph for side impacts and 30 mph for head-on collisions—more than double the speed for existing tank cars. The proposal allows flexibility in reaching that goal, but it is expected the outer tank car shell and both head ends will be strengthened, the inner tank holding the hazmat cargo will be better shielded, and the space between the two will be designed with more energy absorption and protection capabilities.

The proposed rule also sets a maximum speed limit of 50 mph for any train transporting a PIH tank car. In addition, a temporary speed restriction of 30 mph is being proposed for all PIH tank cars not meeting the puncture-resistance standard and which are traveling in ‘dark’, or non-signalized territory, until the rule is fully implemented or other safety measures are installed.

Finally, the proposed rule requires that some of the oldest PIH tank cars in use today be phased out on an accelerated schedule so they no longer carry PIH materials. Specifically, this addresses the concern that PIH tank cars manufactured prior to 1989 with non-normalized steel may not adequately resist the development of fractures that can lead to a catastrophic failure.

“When the opportunity to make major advances in safety is within our reach, we should not settle for incremental measures,” Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph H. Boardman said.

This proposal was developed by the Department’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration in close consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration and addresses issues arising from serious train accidents involving hazmat releases that occurred in Minot, ND, Macdonia, TX, and Graniteville, SC.

For additional information, [click here](#).

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