

Competing Bills Address Oil Transport Safety

PHUONG LE, Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Washington lawmakers on Monday considered competing measures that try to address potential risks as more crude oil is shipped by rail into the state.

The Senate Ways and Means Committee heard testimony on a mostly Republican-backed bill that would study the safety of transporting oil and hazardous materials by train, including reviewing gaps in local, state and federal oil-spill response.

Meanwhile, the House Appropriations Committee took testimony on a competing Democratic-sponsored bill that is favored by environmental groups who say it provides more transparency and calls for more immediate action.

The movement of oil into and through Washington state is changing dramatically as more crude oil from the Bakken shales of North Dakota arrives by train and creates potential risk for new areas of the state, such as along the Columbia River.

The state for years has received crude oil from Alaska and elsewhere by ship, barges or pipelines, but trains carrying crude oil started arriving at terminals in Tacoma and Anacortes only in the past year or so.

Facilities are being proposed at the ports of Grays Harbor and Vancouver to handle hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil by rail. And oil tanker traffic traveling through state waters could also increase under a Kinder Morgan Canada proposal to triple the amount of crude oil it sends through its Trans Mountain pipeline to the Vancouver, British Columbia, area.

"We need to be prepared for these new risks," said Bruce Wishart of Puget Soundkeeper Alliance who testified Monday in support of the House bill.

House Bill 2347 authorizes the state Department of Ecology to come up with new rules requiring tug escorts for oil tankers entering Grays Harbor and the Columbia River. It also would require refineries and other facilities that receive oil shipments by vessels or rail cars to submit transit data to the Ecology Department. Some who testified about the bill last month worried that tug escorts would create navigational hazards, among other concerns.

"Fundamentally, the public has the right to know how much and where that oil is coming from so they can have appropriate disaster response," the bill's primary sponsor, Rep. Jessyn Farrell, D-Seattle, said in an interview.

Greg Hanon, a lobbyist who represents the Western States Petroleum Association, said Monday that he was concerned the confidentiality provision in the House bill

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wasn't strong enough. A representative from the oil industry group testified last week in favor of the Senate bill.

The safety of oil trains has come under increased scrutiny with recent fiery train derailments. In December, an oil train derailed and exploded near Casselton, N.D. The accident occurred about a mile outside the town, and no one was hurt, but about 2,000 people were evacuated to avoid toxic smoke.

In July, a runaway oil train derailed and exploded in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, near the Maine border, killing 47 people.

It's important to "make sure we're keeping up with it," Sen. Doug Ericksen, R-Ferndale, primary sponsor of Senate Bill 6524, said last week. "It's specifically designed to focus on prevention and make sure we have the resources available to provide response."

His bill also allocates \$10 million from the general fund to implement the act and sets up a grant program for first responders.

Dale Jensen of the Ecology Department on Monday said both bills offer good measures to make the state's oil preparedness program even more robust, but the agency couldn't support either bill because they require money not included in the governor's budget.

BNSF Railway said last month that it shares detailed information with emergency responders in communities on its network and at the state level for safety reasons, but no longer makes that information public after 9/11 for security reasons.

Chances of either bill passing out of both chambers are uncertain because Democrats control the House and a predominantly Republican coalition steers the Senate.

"Both chambers understand the public appetite for getting something done," said Farrell, the House bill's main sponsor.

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