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US senators turn up pressure on federal railroad inspector numbers

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By: **Kyle Potter**, Forum News Service

WASHINGTON – More than a dozen U.S. senators, including North Dakota Sens. Heidi Heitkamp and John Hoeven, are pushing to put more federal railroad inspectors in the field.

Boosting inspector numbers – which haven't grown in the Bakken region even as oil production and crude-by-rail traffic has boomed – has become a top priority for federal officials and lawmakers after a year marked by several high profile crude oil accidents on railroads.

The two North Dakota senators participated in a Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing Wednesday to discuss how to improve railroad inspections in hopes of avoiding another accident like the fiery derailment in Casselton Dec. 30.

An unprecedented increase in crude-by-rail traffic has been sharpest in North Dakota, where nearly 800,000 barrels of crude were shipped out of the Bakken on railroads per day late last year, according to industry estimates. Shippers moved less than 100,000 barrels daily by rail in 2010.

But federal inspector ranks in the region haven't grown with the increase in traffic. The Federal Railroad Administration hasn't added inspectors in North Dakota in the last decade, and the Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration does not have any inspectors near the Bakken on a permanent basis.

Heitkamp, D-N.D., and more than a dozen other senators, including U.S. Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., called on the Senate Appropriations Committee to address the inspector shortage by supporting a new fund for federal agencies to hire additional inspectors, perform more research and train more first responders.

"We need to give our communities confidence that energy products being transported by rail – which have increased greatly in the last few years, especially in North Dakota – are moving as safely as possible," Heitkamp said in a news release.

Separately, Hoeven, a Republican, has pushed the committee and U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx to find ways to hire more inspectors at both PHMSA and the FRA. Earlier this year, he helped secure funding for an additional 15 inspectors in the FRA's budget.

Heitkamp asked Foxx Wednesday if the Department of Transportation is coordinating with states to set up state-run inspection programs, and whether the federal government could kick in funding so states can hire their own inspectors.

Forum News Service published a story late last month highlighting North Dakota's lack of such a program, despite almost single-handedly increasing the amount of crude shipped by rail nationally. Thirty other states have their own inspectors. North Dakota officials say they're now considering such a program.

Boosting inspections is just one necessary step to improve crude-by-rail shipments, Hoeven said. He also stressed the need to slow trains through major metropolitan areas, build more pipelines to ease rail traffic and issue federal standards for stronger tank cars.

Several members of the committee pressed Foxx for a timeline on when his agency will issue new rules to address safety concerns of the DOT-111 car, the workhorse of the crude oil fleet that has been known for decades to easily rupture in derailments. That car was involved in the Casselton derailment as well as an accident in Quebec last summer that killed 47 people.

Foxx would only say he hoped to complete the rulemaking process "as soon as possible."

Foxx is scheduled to visit the site of the Casselton crash on April 24.

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