



An amateur photographer captured this picture of an oil train moving through Mosier, Oregon, on April 18. Union Pacific acknowledged it was the first mile-long oil train to move through Hood River and other gorge communities in Oregon.

PHOTO BY JOZSEF URMOS/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

ODOT will get oil train info

By Rob Davis | The Oregonian
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The Oregon Department of Transportation reversed direction Wednesday on a plan to stop asking railroads for annual reports showing where crude oil moves in the state.

The agency had said it would no longer get the reports because The Oregonian successfully sought to have them made public.

A day after The Oregonian reported on the plan, Gov. John Kitzhaber and the agency's director, Matt Garrett, took swift action.

In a letter to ODOT's rail division, Garrett said ODOT should immediately tell railroad companies to submit reports for 2013, a year in which oil train shipments increased 250 percent statewide. The forms, which are the public's only way to know how much oil moves by rail through Portland, Bend, Eugene and other cities, were due March 1.

Garrett acknowledged in an interview that ODOT needed to begin fulfilling its duty as the state's rail safety regulator to protect Oregonians, not the companies it oversees.

"You have my commitment that if my agency engages in a manner that stands off or there's an arrogance, I'm a phone call away, I want to know about it," Garrett said. "We're better than that. We serve the public."

The decision is timely, coming less than a week after Union Pacific sent its first long oil train through Hood River and other towns on the Oregon side of the Columbia River Gorge.

Without criticizing ODOT by name, the governor said he expected all state agencies overseeing crude oil transportation to “work at the highest standards possible to protect public safety and ensure information that is available be shared appropriately.”

Despite Kitzhaber’s earlier pledges to review and tighten rules, first responders and the public continue to be left in the dark about crude-by-rail movements in Oregon. Secretive railroad companies have offered piecemeal information and ODOT, the state’s rail safety regulator, actively fought The Oregonian’s efforts to learn more.

When the mile-long oil train moved through the gorge last Friday, two fire chiefs along the route didn’t learn about it from Union Pacific, but from The Oregonian afterward.

“Hmm. I was not aware of that at all,” said Jim Appleton, chief of the Mosier Fire District, a volunteer agency that protects 1,100 residents living around the Columbia Gorge town. “If they’re going to move to that type of shipment, I’d like to know.”

The train’s presence came to light only after an amateur photographer looking for wildflowers April 18 photographed it and notified the nonprofit Friends of the Columbia Gorge, which then told The Oregonian.

Friends representatives said they met with Union Pacific officials a week earlier and had been assured the company was only moving a few cars of oil interspersed with other commodities. The company said it wasn’t moving mile-long trains carrying solely oil.

Michael Lang, Friends’ conservation director, said he felt misled that the company then moved such a train just seven days later.

“What that tells us, and should tell communities through the gorge, is that Union Pacific’s word cannot be trusted,” Lang said. “They have taught us with their own words and actions to be very skeptical.”

Aaron Hunt, a Union Pacific spokesman, said his company had always left open the possibility that it would move full trains of oil, something it hopes to continue doing. What the company told Lang “was accurate at the time,” Hunt said. “That was accurate until Friday.”

Hunt said the train carried Utah oil to Portland. He wouldn’t say whether it unloaded in Portland or continued elsewhere, leaving open the possibility that other emergency response agencies aren’t aware of the new traffic.

Union Pacific notified ODOT about the shipment, Hunt said. But the agency didn’t tell firefighters along the route.

Garrett said ODOT’s rail division needs to hasten efforts to rewrite state rules to ensure first responders get the information they need. Garrett set a May 5 deadline for a draft proposal.

State law already requires railroads to notify firehouses across the state about the hazardous materials they have moved through their communities in the previous year. That hasn’t been happening. Three fire chiefs told The Oregonian they weren’t getting those notices but want them.

“More specific information would be great,” Devon Wells, chief of Hood River Fire & EMS said Wednesday. “I don’t want to receive a daily email every time a train goes through -- I’d just block those emails. But an annual report would be good information.”

Kitzhaber, who has organized a statewide oil train briefing next Tuesday in Portland, said he wants to see

Business	B6	Living	B8
Class. Index	A9	Marine	A2
Comics	B9	News	B8
Crossword	B9	Obituaries	A7
Consumer/NT	B9	Sports	B1
Editorial	A8	Television	B12

notifications improve. “It’s critical that first responders across Oregon have a full understanding of where crude oil and other hazardous materials are moving for training purposes and to respond in the event of an emergency,” he said.

Until changes take place, communities along the rail line are left to wonder how prepared their emergency responders are.

Arthur Babitz, Hood River’s mayor, said he was troubled to learn about the new traffic through his city. If a train derails and catches fire there, he said firefighters would be on scene within five minutes. But they wouldn’t learn from railroads what the train carried for 45 minutes.

“I imagine CNN shoving a microphone in my face and asking about some horrible tragedy that’s affected my city,” he said. “Given how dangerous these trains can be – the fact that we didn’t know anything about it – makes me wonder how much regulatory oversight there is to this. That can’t make me feel comfortable.”