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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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ELLEN DONESKI, STAFF DIRECTOR
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July 7, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

One year ago, disaster struck in the Canadian town of Lac-Mégantic when an unattended freight train from a U.S.-owned company inflicted heartbreaking tragedy on our neighbors in Quebec. The train, carrying Bakken crude oil, ran uncontrolled and derailed, resulting in a catastrophic fire and the explosion of several tank cars and the deaths of more than 40 people. In the months since Lac-Mégantic, we have seen smaller, yet still alarming crude-by-rail incidents across the U.S., yet we have been slow to react to existing gaps in the safety standards of tank cars carrying hazardous materials through our communities.

Mr. President, we cannot wait for another devastating derailment and explosion to happen here that will force us into action. The time to act is now.

To begin with, we must strengthen and improve our tank car standards to mitigate the risk of another derailment and explosion. Because this step alone will not solve our problems, we must also reassess our current hazardous materials regulations and oversight of the shipment of crude oil. Finally, we must invest in training and research, while also increasing transparency to ensure that we can respond quickly and efficiently when an accident occurs.

In the past months, the Department of Transportation (DOT) has taken several strong steps to address crude-by-rail and I commend the Department for their action. However, I am deeply concerned that many of these steps will not have the needed impact without significant regulatory changes and more effective oversight. DOT recently proposed a rulemaking that is currently under review at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). I urge you to have OMB act on that rulemaking as expeditiously and thoroughly as possible. It should address all of the issues that we are facing in the transportation of crude-by-rail, and establish procedures so that we can better anticipate and understand developing issues before tragedy strikes.

As you said recently, America cannot wait for Congress to act. This is especially true when it comes to safety on our rails, which has been my one of my highest priorities since I became Chairman of the Commerce Committee -- and it still is today. Therefore, I stand ready to work with you on addressing these issues in a timely manner. The safety and well-being of the public depends on it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jay Rockefeller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jay" being particularly prominent.

John D. Rockefeller IV
Chairman