

April 9, 2014

Testimony of Timothy E. Pellerin, Fire Chief of Rangeley, Maine. Representing the Rangeley Fire/Rescue Department before the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies. Chairman: Patty Murray (D), Ranking Member: Susan Collins (R) Maine

Good morning Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Collins and Members of the Committee.

My name is Tim Pellerin. I am the Fire Chief for the Town of Rangeley, Maine, which is located 50 miles west of the Capital of Augusta in the western Maine Mountains.

The Rangeley Fire/Rescue Department consists of 24 paid on-call members and covers 19 towns, townships and plantations, covering 500 square miles. The area has a year round population of around 3300 which swells to over 10,000 during the recreational seasons.

In the early morning of July 6, 2013 an oil freight train with 70 plus cars, the bulk of which each car contained 44,000 gallons of oil each, lost its brakes and careened into the village of Lac-Megantic. The unmanned train, derailed, spilling its' contents of oil and ignited. The ensuing fire and explosions wound up destroying six city blocks, caused millions of dollars of damage, and resulted in the fatalities of 47 people.

To start from the beginning, at about 4am, Franklin County Maine received a call for mutual aid assistance to the village of Lac-Megantic which is about an hour and a half north of Rangeley, across the border in Canada. We, along with 7 other Maine fire departments responded with 8 pieces of fire apparatus which consisted of various types of fire and emergency equipment and 30 volunteer firefighters.

As we crossed the Coburn Gore Border crossing into Canada, we could see large plumes of smoke from over were over 30 miles away.

Arriving in Lac-Megantic shortly after 6am, we were faced with a true disaster, with over 30 buildings on fire, 6 city blocks destroyed, and a municipal hydrant system rendered completely inoperable due to the oil explosions. In addition there were over 40 tank cars derailed, ruptured, leaking, and on fire. We were also faced with about a dozen derailed rail cars that were full and in jeopardy of exploding due to their proximity to the cars already on fire.

After assessing our situation and meeting with our Canadian counterparts, we were able to set our two highest priorities. One was to get water to the buildings on Main Street, that were still burning, and two was to get water to the overheated railcars before they exploded. We did this by utilizing our apparatus and hose to establish a water draft supply from Lake Megantic, which was over 3000 feet away from the fire scene.

For the next 30 hours apparatus from Maine was used along with equipment from Canada, pumping over a million gallons of water in an attempt to contain the fire from spreading any further. In addition, 8000 gallons of foam was trucked in from the refinery in Toronto to help extinguish the burning rail cars. By 12:00 p.m. on Sunday July 7th, the burning rail cars had been extinguished with foam. It took over six hours to finally extinguish all of the burning and leaking train cars with foam. By 2:00 p.m. Sunday we had secured our equipment and were cleared to return back to Maine.

As we left this tragic scene, there were hugs, tears, and cheers saying thank you to the USA, thank you to American firemen, and thank you for coming to help save our village.

We arrived back in Maine two hours after starting the trip home, and having just completed over 30 hours of operations in Canada.

On the back of the aerial tower ladder truck from Rangeley there was a 3'x 5' American flag secured to a safety rail that we had placed there for our Memorial Day parade in May. Throughout the weekend that flag became a point of focus, a symbol of help and hope for many Canadian firefighters, who would come up to the truck to ask if they could have their picture taken with it.

The lessons we learned from this tragedy were many, including how a disaster such as this can affect a small community in many ways. It has affected the both the operations and the moral of both the local fire department and community of course, but at the same time it strengthened our bond of friendship and brotherhood with our Canadian brother firefighters.

Upon arriving in Canada, we had to overcome many obstacles. First, there was no radio communications. Over 80 miles away from our dispatch center, we had no way to communicate with them. Our radio frequencies were incompatible with those in Canada. In addition we did not speak the same language. We were fortunate to find an interpreter within the fire dept. that was able to work with us over the weekend. Fire hose couplings also posed a problem as our hoses were not compatible with theirs. Much of our equipment was completely different from the Canadians fire equipment.

My conclusions are as follows. It is my opinion that a two-sided approach should be taken in order to improve and maximize the focus of safety in the transportation of hazardous materials within the United States. I believe we need to be both proactive, rather than reactive, as well as be properly trained in large scale disasters such as this.

First off, I feel it's important to be proactive by doing the following:

- 1) **Enforcement:** All federal and state hazardous material laws must be enforced, regulated and maintained for both the rail and transportation shipping industry
- 2) **Planning:** We need to make sure that both Rail shippers and transporters have adequate plans in place so that they may respond swiftly and appropriately for support during future major spills or disasters, similar to that which occurred in Lac-Megantic.
- 3) **Course of Action:** Develop and exercise realistic plans that when put to the test will work on all levels, especially the local level for both the first responders and the Rail and transporters of hazardous materials.

Second, I suggest that we find a way to develop and continue to provide integrated and adequate large scale hazardous materials disaster training similar to the NIMS/ICS training we received at all levels.

- 1) **First Responder Large Scale Disaster Training:** Realistic large scale hazardous materials response training, either web based or hands-on that encompasses all levels of hazardous materials response, not only for the large metropolitan areas, but for the urban and rural departments as well. Basically, a program that would reach as many first responders and their mutual aid partners as possible, so they can both train and respond for large scale hazardous materials events in conjunction with each other.

In conclusion, it is my belief every fire department in the nation is well prepared and ready to handle the everyday common emergencies. However, events such as Lac-Megantic teach us that we must work hard to prepare, train, respond and recover from future and similar events of this magnitude. We need to do our due diligence to be sure that whatever future path is taken it leads us towards tangible results with real long term solutions. The loss of lives and properties, the despair that we saw, and the heartfelt thanks we received lays testament to the fact that although our work was well done and appreciated, we must do whatever it takes to prevent such an unfortunate event from taken place in the future.

After having bonded with our Canadian counterparts during those many long and strenuous hours, we invited them to the town of Rangeley in September to reflect on our experiences we had together. It was during this event that we presented the same American flag that hung on the back of our fire truck to our Canadian brother Firefighters, the same flag that many Canadian firefighters had their pictures taken with, that had ultimately become the symbol of help in their hour of need. It was a bittersweet event as we formed respect and friendship for each other, solidifying the firefighter bond of brotherhood, and proving that this bond knows no borders. However, we wish this event had never happened and can only hope that those who have the power to make change will do whatever it takes to prevent any such disasters in the future.

It is my sincere hope that you take some of these suggestions offered to you this morning, and do what you can to help improve the safety of Rail transport for the first responders, and help us guard the lives of the citizens we serve and protect.

Respectfully Submitted,

Timothy E. Pellerin
Chief of Department
Rangeley Fire/Rescue