CP Runaway Train Wreck Claims Three - the Latest Casualties of PSR

Just after midnight on February 4th, 2019, Canadian Pacific (CP) Train #301 with three locomotives and 112 cars ran away down a steep grade in the Canadian Rockies, piling up the lead locomotive, the mid-train DPU (distributed power unit), and 99 loaded grain cars. Killed in the wreck were three crew members – conductor Dylan Paradis, trainee Daniel Waldenberger-Bulmer, and engineer Andrew Dockrell.

In the wake of numerous other runaway trains in the U.S. and Canada in recent years, it is baffling that such a horrific tragedy is possible today. The ongoing failure of the industry to provide proper protection against runaway trains – combined with government’s continued hands-off approach - have combined to facilitate disasters such as this one. As usual, the regulatory agency acted after the fact, and within a week, Transport Canada had issued a Ministerial Order mandating handbrake applications on all trains that are stopped by emergency brake applications on steep grades.

While there are important technical differences between this wreck and the infamous Lac-Mégantic runaway in July of 2013, there are many similarities. As a result, one can conclude that nothing at all has been learned from the previous disaster, and if we do not come to terms with this most recent crash, nothing will be learned going forward. Predictably, both major Canadian railroads – CP and Canadian National (CN) – have already appealed the Ministerial Order on handbrakes.

Long & Heavy Trains. Railroad Workers United has campaigned for years against the practice of running long and heavy trains, but the rail industry appears determined to run them at all cost. CSX began lengthening coal and manifest trains a few years ago. On August 2nd, 2017, a long mixed-freight train of 178-cars derailed in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania, piling up 33 cars and causing a fire and mass evacuation. The wreck of a Union Pacific freight train on October 4th, 2018 in Granite Canyon, at the foot of Sherman Hill, west of Cheyenne, WY, resulted in the death of two crew members and the derailment of the lead locomotives and 56 cars of Train MGRCY04, when it ran away down the mountain and into the rear of Train MCPNP-03, derailling 9 of that train’s cars. Meanwhile this past winter, BNSF began testing double length grain trains of 230 cars, nearly 3 miles long. One of the basic hallmarks of “Precision Scheduled Railroading” (PSR), that is currently sweeping the North American rail industry, is to run trains as long as possible. So look for more of these behemoths in the coming year and, along with them, more disastrous train runaways and wrecks.

Proper Use of Air Brakes and Hand Brakes. In the case of Lac-Mégantic, the rail carrier – Montreal, Maine & Atlantic (MMA) - mandated that train crews not apply the train’s air brakes when leaving a train unattended on a steep grade, but instead rely only on hand brakes for its securing. Ironically, in the case of Train #301, the rail carrier – Canadian Pacific – demanded NO handbrakes be applied to a train when stopped on a steep mountain grade. Granted, each corporation had its reasons for its behavior, but these revolved around economics, manpower, crew size, scheduling, and so forth, certainly not safety. When heavy tonnage is stopped on a steep grade – especially in very cold weather – the opportunity for a runaway train increases exponentially. Since trains come equipped with air brakes and handbrakes on both the train cars and locomotives, common sense would dictate that both safety appliances be employed. Had they been, then both tragedies could have been avoided.

ECP Braking. Meanwhile, a form of braking that has been tried and tested in recent years known as Electronically Controlled Pneumatic Braking (ECP), sits on the shelf, very much the same way that PTC had languished for a few decades prior to it being federally mandated in 2008. While PTC represents a giant step forward in rail safety, it does not have the capacity to stop all train wrecks, including those mentioned in this article. But ECP braking, in combination with PTC, could eliminate most major wrecks (see article on Page 3). Unfortunately, it will probably take another series of tragic and costly crashes, in terms of lives and property destruction, before government agencies are forced to act and mandate ECP brakes. Meantime, the rail carriers dig in their heels and cry that such applications are too costly. They have done the very same for practically every proposed safety device or safe practice throughout their history - from PTC to switch point indicators this century; from the Janney coupler to the air brake itself in the 19th century!

Conclusion. The carriers wish to run ever longer and heavier trains. And they want to run them with fewer maintenance personnel, fewer crew members, fewer locomotives, and less infrastructure, period. They do not wish to implement proven safety technology. And they do not wish to be regulated by either government or union work rules. This arrogant and reckless approach to railroading - if allowed to run amok - can only result in future train wrecks and disasters like that of CP Train #301.