La Coalition’s Rail Safety Campaign - Woodlands & Wetlands Chapter, Sierra Club - is urging state legislators to take immediate action in protecting children, faculty, and staff of schools at risk of negative impact from the rail transport and/or storage of hazardous materials by supporting HB 1542 Hazardous Substances-Schools.

Here are some facts relevant to this call to action:

▪ Trains passing through our communities travel yards from schools, parks, playgrounds, and other public locations, leaving over 25 million men, women, and children in the U.S. at risk. One fiery explosion in Lac-Mégantic killed 47 unsuspecting citizens of Quebec, Canada.

▪ There are 14,800 schools and 5.7 million students in the U.S. located within an Oil Train Blast Zone, the two-mile diameter potential impact zone in the event of an oil train fire. Chicago, hosting the world's largest rail freight hub, has 77,000 kids at school in this zone and is one of the nation’s top five cities having school children at risk from oil train derailments and explosions.

▪ Currently, there is no partnership to disseminate information about threats related to the transport and storage of hazardous materials to parents of students, faculty, and staff of schools at risk. Furthermore, school districts are not included in the development and implementation of response plans specific to incidents involving hazardous materials.

▪ The oil industry repeatedly obstructs access to information the public has a right to know, and the federal government has done little to enforce safety standards. Current policy allows the rail industry to regulate itself, which empowers the industry to prioritize private profits over public safety. In recent rulemaking, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) stated, “safety is not a pretext for regulation.”

▪ Train cars are inadequate for flammable materials and unable to withstand forces of an accident, even at slow speeds. Trains are currently allowed to travel at speeds more than twice the rated “puncture velocity.” When traveling only 7 mph in Custer, Washington, a train consisting of the newest DOT-117 tank cars ruptured and ignited, evacuating a town.

▪ The number of freight trains on rails may soon go up. A $31 billion merger is on the table to combine Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern railroads. If approved, this creates the only railroad linking Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.

▪ Trains travel on turn of the century railroads that were not built to accommodate the weight and frequency of current cargo. Chicago’s rail hub has approximately 1,000 trains, or about 40,000 rail cars, passing through daily. This is one quarter of the nation’s entire rail traffic.

▪ Nearly 400 hazardous materials are transported by rail, all of which we can expect to roll through our communities. Cargo includes highly explosive ethanol; Bakken Crude oil with hydrogen sulfide that can cause internal organ failure, infertility, immune system suppression, blood disorders, cancer, birth defects, and genetic mutations; anhydrous ammonia and chlorine gas, which kill within a couple of breaths; EtO, a known carcinogen linked to conditions such as leukemia, genetic and nerve damage, and spontaneous abortion; and spent nuclear fuel that's been compared to an X-ray machine left on. Discussions now center around transporting super-chilled liquefied natural gas. An LNG explosion with gliding fire that can't be put out would dwarf Bakken crude catastrophes.
HB 1542 would ensure:

- **Worst-case scenarios are communicated to both administrators and teachers.** Teachers are on the front line of responsible and effective safety management for students and ultimately carry out administrative directives. Not only must they have a thorough understanding of what a potential incident may look like, but they should also have a say in how to manage such an incident if it were to occur. Teachers may identify complications that administrators won’t foresee.

- **Routes and safety zones are identified and communicated to administrators and teachers.** School personnel must know the routes to take and locations where they can seek safety for students.

- **Specific types of hazardous materials that can negatively impact a school are identified and communicated to administrators and teachers.** Response plans will vary based on the potential impact of different hazardous materials. For example, the release of anhydrous ammonia can look like smoke. Teachers may think it’s safe to allow students to pass through in order to reach a safe zone, yet inhalation is lethal and sudden. Lives could be saved by knowing to move children upwind. Also, protocol for a spill will be different from that of an explosion.

- **Drills are included in emergency response plans.** Administration, teachers, and students must have opportunities to practice emergency procedures. School personnel won’t have much time to think during an incident; they must be familiar with protocol. Drills also offer opportunities to identify potential problems that can arise during emergencies.

- **Emergency response plans are in place for students with special needs.** Students with cognitive disabilities, vision and hearing deficits, physical disabilities, and etc. will have specific needs that must be addressed and accommodated prior to an incident.

- **Evacuation locations and procedures are communicated to parents.** Knowing where children will be located after an incident and pick up procedures will help alleviate confusion and high emotions for parents during an emergency.

- **Hierarchy for communication is identified and accessible.** Administration, teachers, parents, and students must know where and how to access information during an emergency.

- **Potential ‘Impact Zones’ are identified and visibly marked.** Stickers on doors, such as those displayed to communicate ‘No Guns Allowed’, or signs will assist in raising issue awareness for administrators, teachers, parents, students, and school visitors.

- **Safety Zones are identified and visibly marked.** Stickers and/or signs will assist in communicating emergency protocol, routes, and locations during an incident.

- **Potential ‘Impact Zones’ are communicated to parents during student registration.** Parents have a right to know if something is present that may negatively impact the safety of their child. They must be allowed to make their own safety-related decisions.

- **An Incident Command System (ICS) is implemented as a mandatory channel for communication.** Stakeholders must have small teams at appropriate levels that have certified and trained personnel who can integrate into an ICS organization. An incident response plan will function more efficiently if each stakeholder knows how the entire response plan works and how to function within it. Also, the process of training and exercises will aid in facilitating preparation, making connections, and identifying gaps and priorities.

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