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Gaspésie Railway Society registers fourth straight traffic record

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NEW RICHMOND: – The Gaspésie Railway Society has registered a fourth freight traffic record in its twelve-year history as 4,323 carloads were hauled between Caplan and Matapedia in 2018, a 55% increase compared to 2017. Since 2015, the number of carloads has almost tripled on the line.

Between 2016 and 2017, the transporter under municipal control had also experienced a significant increase of 60% in traffic. This was attributable to the hauling of windmill blades and, to a lesser extent, to the activities of the McInnis Cement plant which opened in June 2017.

In 2018, the windmill blade traffic towards the United States kept increasing while the cement traffic went up almost ten-fold, from 111 carloads in 2017 to about 1,000 last year. Close to 1,800 cars were used to export windmill blades in 2018 and the Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle sent 1,500 cars of wood chips and lumber out of the region.

"Some growth should still happen in 2019. We should surpass 5,000 carloads. We will not be far if we don't. We are expecting a rise in cement traffic because the McInnis Cement plant is still increasing its production. The customer decides so we don't control the transportation mode but if we keep hauling the same proportion of the plant's production, the tonnage taking the railway will increase as well," explains Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

Photo: G. Gagné
Cement traffic increased by almost ten-fold between 2017 and 2018.

Between 2015 and 2018, the hauling revenues of the transporter went up about ten-fold, going from $625,000 to a bracket between $6 million and $9 million. Mr. Lévesque prefers not releasing exact figures for now.

The number of carloads will increase for the forest products in 2019, considering that the Temrex sawmill drying capacity will increase and a new customer, the *Association coopérative forestière of Saint-Elzéar*, will use the railway, That industry will ship lumber out of New Richmond at one point during the year.

"Usually, when the drying capacity increases like at Temrex, lumber is sent farther. When the distance increases, rail transport is at an advantage. As for the Saint-Elzéar sawmill, we don't have a date yet but we know that rail shipments should start in 2019," explains Mr. Lévesque.

The hauling of windmill blades will likely remain the same in 2019, since 100% of Gaspé's LM Wind Power production was shipped by rail last year. That production is still destined to the south part of the United States, mostly to Texas.

The fact that the line between Caplan and Gaspé was put in a dormant state in 2015 represents a big hurdle for the Gaspésie Railway Society growth, traffic-wise and revenue-wise. That stretch covers 60% of the Matapedia to Gaspé line. That decision to "mothball" the Caplan-Gaspé line was made by Transport Quebec, when that ministry acquired the line in March 2015. The Gaspésie Railway Society was experiencing financial difficulties at the end of 2014.

The decision to put the line in a dormant state was denounced by some of the region's leaders in 2015 because it was targeting the portion of the railway that was expected to experience major growth. LM Wind Power was trying to get contracts in the United States at that time and the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction since May 2014. The two plants are located on the dormant stretch of line.

The blades and cement are hauled to New Richmond where they are transferred to railcars. In the case of cement, a second land terminal had to be built in Nouvelle, due to the so-called limited weekly capacity of the Cascapedia-Saint-Jules bridges regarding fully loaded freight cars. The matter is not relevant for windmill blade cars because they are light.

As long as those two bridges are not replaced, the cement will not be loaded in railcars in Port Daniel. The line passes nearby. In the meantime, the cement shipped out over shorter distances, like the volume sold to New Brunswick customers, is sent by trucks because the cost of transferring the cement in New Richmond and Nouvelle would add too much to its transportation costs.

Luc Lévesque hopes that the replacement of the Cascapeda-Saint-Jules bridges will be finished by the end of 2020.

"It is still possible but we have no control on the matter. The bridges pass over a salmon river and there are (environmental) authorizations to receive. The file is managed by the BQI (Bureau Québécois des infrastructures)," notes Mr. Lévesque.

The *Bureau Québécois des infrastructures*, a public body managing Quebec's main infrastructure projects, inherited the Gaspé Peninsula railway file when former Quebec premier Philippe Couillard decided to authorize the upgrading of that line, on May 5, 2017, through a $100 million envelope announcement.

Until then, his government, imposing an austerity program, had allotted minimal funding for the railroad betterment. Despite acquiring it two years earlier, the rising clientele and a need to fix the bridges were identified in 2010.