

McInnis Cement limited to ten cars per week because of bridge restrictions

Company expects to transport 40 carloads per week

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – Transport Québec is imposing a weekly limit of ten loaded railcars to McInnis Cement, apparently because of the wear and tear effect those cars have on the two Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges. However, McInnis Cement's operational needs will increase to 40 carloads in May and the Gaspésie Railway Society wants to haul that traffic.

That limit, imposed last fall, has so far not really hurt McInnis Cement because 10 weekly cars correspond to the recent rail deliveries of the company. The Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges are located between New Richmond where the cement is loaded in railcars, and Matapédia where those cars are transferred to Canadian National for the final delivery to customers located in Ontario, Nova Scotia and the United States.

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, intends to clarify the situation with Transport Québec as soon as possible. He doesn't see the logic of setting up a limit of ten cars per week.

"A study was conducted and they are explaining for now the notion of metal fatigue. I can understand that concept. You use an infrastructure and there is wear and tear attached to that. But if our bridges can bear the stress of ten cars the same day, something we are authorized to do, how is it that the bridge needs a rest the following days until the next week? I don't understand that part," says Mr. Dubé.

"We are not talking about passing the 40 loaded cars the same day. We can spread the load to five trains of eight cars each per week, for example," he adds.

Éric Dubé knew, since the end of the fall, that Transport Québec was seeing the frequency of heavy trains as a problem. There was even a question of completely closing the two Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges at one point. Those bridges were built in the 1890s but other bridges of that age are still functional in North America.

The study commissioned by Transport Québec was in



Photo: G. Gagné

The Gaspésie Railway Society must deal with constraints in its operations, such as putting an empty car between each loaded cement car in order to reduce the concentration of weight when the train goes over the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges. That situation requires a lot of shunting in the New Richmond and Nouvelle yards.

fact undertaken and realized by Norda Stelo, an engineering firm formerly called Groupe Roche. Its results are scheduled to be released during the first week of March.

"We will then know what kind of repairs we can carry out on the bridges in order to avoid limiting McInnis Cement's shipments by rail. Our orientations are simple. There is no way we will lose rail traffic because of those bridge restrictions, and there is no way McInnis Cement will pay one additional cent per tonne in order to send its cement by rail if a pinch hit solution has to be put up with," says Éric Dubé.

The pinch hit solutions exist, he insists. "If we have to add a silo in Nouvelle, we will do it. We have a piece of land that could be used there. We could load ten cars in New Richmond and load the 30 others in Nouvelle. If the study says that we can put \$4 million on the two (Cascapedia-St-Jules) bridges and they will then last the two years it will take to replace them, no problem. The government will have to cough up the money. It is a crucial matter. We need it for the development of the region and for the Gaspésie Railway Society. If the management of McInnis Cement comes in July and asks us to haul 60 more cars per week, what will I tell them?" asks Éric Dubé.

On May 5, 2017, Premier Philippe Couillard announced \$100 million for the refurbishment of the Matapédia to Gaspé railway. A few small repairs carried out in 2017 were apparently taken from that envelope, for a total of \$4 million. For example, the \$1 million replacement of the Ristigouche South East bridge in September was taken from that sum, although that work was initially scheduled to take place in 2015. The information regarding the remaining money is slow to come.

"There is money available, considering last year's announcement and that money has to be used to facilitate our operations. We are in full development mode but it is slowed down because of the government's administrative procedure, or for reasons we don't understand," points out Mr. Dubé.

The Matapédia to Gaspé railroad is in a dormant state between Caplan and Gaspé, which correspond to almost two-thirds of its length. The decision to abandon that section of the line was made in March 2015 by then Quebec Transport Minister Robert Poëti. Even if the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction and would need rail transport, McInnis Cement's administration was not very clear about using it at the time.

The line passes a few feet from the plant silos but is still

about 300 carloads per year, or six cars weekly.

However, that contract is followed by other transport deals. A volume of 40 cars per week amounts to about 2,000 carloads annually or about 200,000 tonnes. It is close to 10 percent of the Port Daniel plant's yearly output.

The Gaspésie Railway Society already has to deal with constraints in its operations, such as putting an empty car between each loaded cement car in order to reduce the concentration of weight when the train passes on the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges. That situation requires a lot of shunting in New Richmond and in Nouvelle, once the train has passed on the bridges. That shunting eats up a lot of time and money that could be used for more efficient duties. There aren't many railroad companies in North America dealing with that kind of operational constraint.

Some of the plant's input could also be brought by rail but the current context doesn't favour that in the short term.

"Building a silo in Nouvelle would cost \$450,000. A ballpark figure for the extra transportation cost between New Richmond and Nouvelle could amount to \$40,000 a

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week, or about \$1,000 per railcar. It is a lot of money for a temporary solution. Transport Québec has to pay that bill," states Éric Dubé.

In his discussions with Transport Québec's management, Éric Dubé was told by the government representatives that if its managers find the bridge safe, they would take the full responsibility of assuming the consequences in case of accident.

"If they give us those responsibilities, we will take all of them, including the bridge's refurbishment or reconstruction and the money going with it and we will proceed fast," concludes the president of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

The spokesperson of McInnis Cement, Maryse Tremblay, only says for now that the company "collaborates with the ministry and the Gaspésie Railway Society to apply a safe solution that will

allow an increase in the number of railcars."

So far, Transport Québec has not replied to the questions asked by SPEC. That ministry has been favouring for years the replacement of the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges. Those new bridges

could be built parallel and close to the existing structures in order to keep train circulation open in the meantime. Despite being aware of the bridges situation for close to a decade, Transports Québec has only carried out studies in that file.