

## Stability marks year 2020 for the Gaspésie Railway Society traffic despite the pandemic and blockade

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – Stability characterizes the 2020 traffic statistics of the Gaspésie Railway Society, even if the last year was marked by two events that could have significantly hampered the transporter's number of carloads, namely the 24-day Listuguj blockade in February and March and the COVID-19 pandemic which began mid-March 2020.

The Gaspésie Railway Society's trains hauled 4,202 cars last year, a small decrease of 0.8% compared to the 4,236 carloads of 2019. The best year of the transporter was 2018 with 4,323 carloads.

The Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle was the most affected client by the blockade and the pandemic because some of the woodchip traffic was transferred to trucks during the Listuguj blockade. The number of cars went from 909 to 630 between 2019 and 2020, a 30.7% drop.

"The Rivière-du-Loup paper mill also shut down its operations for several weeks and that affected our woodchip volume as well. The pandemic was the cause of that shutdown. We hear that the paper mill has found new clients and that things have settled down," explains Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

The situation is a little more complicated regarding Temrex lumber shipments, which have decreased by a



Cement traffic made up for the big loss of lumber and woodchips in 2020.

Photo: G. Gagné

staggering 57%, from 321 to 139 carloads. It is the third consecutive decline. In 2013, the sawmill shipped out 546 lumber carloads to various destinations in Canada and the United States.

"It is out of our control. The pandemic affected the lumber markets at first and after that, sales became very good. We depend on CN's rates (Canadian National) and those rates have increased significantly, thus affecting the train's competitiveness. We are trying to convince CN to lower its transportation rates," says Mr. Lévesque.

In 2019, when Temrex inaugurated its new kilns, which now enable the Nouvelle mill to dry 100% of its lumber, rail transport was supposed to be used to haul the total output of the plant. The number of carloads had been 481 in 2018 and it was supposed to nearly double, according to the Temrex management back then.

The 2020 total drop for Temrex amounts to 462 car-

loads, from 1,230 to 768 cars, or 37.6% compared to 2019.

### Brighter picture in cement hauling

The McInnis Cement traffic more than made up for the Temrex loss though, as the New Richmond and Nouvelle trans-shipment facilities handled 1,790 carloads last year, a rise of 523 compared to the 1,267 cars of 2019, or 41.3%. That was achieved despite the Listuguj blockade, the pandemic and the fact that the New Richmond terminal could not be used during the first 23 days of December because of the work undertaken to finish the construction of the new Cascapedia-St-Jules railway bridges. The blockade, the December flood and the start of the pandemic all occurred during the cement consumption off-season though, points out Luc Lévesque.

"There was a good increase in traffic. It would have

been even better without the blockade and without the COVID. For a more significant increase, we will need a larger pool of cement cars. We are limited by the number of cars available right now. We are bringing the Nouvelle terminal equipment to New Richmond and if we have more cars, we can augment traffic by 20 to 30%. Our client (McInnis Cement) will decide," comments Luc Lévesque.

### Relative stability in windmill blade traffic

Meanwhile, the windmill blade traffic remained quite stable in 2020 compared to 2019. There was a small decrease of 5.5% in the number of cars, 1,734 the year before compared to 1,639 carloads last year. A standard train of 72 cars was delayed over three weeks during the Listuguj blockade and another similar train was delayed in December, but passed in Cascapedia-

St-Jules on December 24, so before the end of the year.

"We lost two trains totalling 172 cars as our customer made two blade shipments through the port of Gaspé over the fall. We will make up that loss in 2021 as three sets of 72 cars are available for a while in order to accelerate the pace and deliver more blades to the United States," points out Luc Lévesque.

The Gaspésie Railway Society's client in windmill blade traffic is GE, or General Electric. That company orders 100% of the blades made by LM Windpower, a plant located in Gaspé. Until rail traffic resumes east of New Richmond, the blades made in Gaspé are trucked to New Richmond and are transferred onto flat cars.

Meanwhile, the other customers of the Gaspésie Railway Society generated five cars altogether in 2020, and Rail GD, the New Richmond based railcar repair shop, was the destination of four of them, exactly as in 2019.

Luc Lévesque is confident that 2021 will be a good year for the Gaspésie Railway Society, considering the limitations provided by the fact that trains can only circulate between Matapédia and Caplan until the Ruisselet and Ruisseau-Leblanc Bridges are rebuilt, and that the Bonaventure River Bridge is upgraded.

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"It will be easier to increase our traffic once we get closer to the sources of business, like McInnis Cement and LM Windpower. We are working very hard to strike agreements and bring input to Port Daniel but as long as we can't reach the plant directly, our possibilities are limited. We have adapted to cement being trucked to New Richmond and its transshipment in railcars but it cannot always work that way. There is always a cost tied to transshipment," says Mr. Lévesque.

Reaching Port Daniel might make profitable some destinations that are currently complicated to reach, like the Moncton area. Once the cement is in a truck for such a relatively short distance, train wise, it stays in a truck.

"In order to reach the Southern New Brunswick market directly, CN will have to open the Miramichi to Moncton stretch of railway on a regular basis for freight, which is not the case right now. On our part, we will have to offer commitments, and freight volumes, and make sure that all the partners agree at the same time," he adds.

The possibility that the Saint-Elzéar sawmill will use the railway to reach some of its markets, an opportunity that has been talked about for close to a decade, depends on the same parameters.

"The Saint-Elzéar plant sells a lot in the Maritimes. In order to reach those markets by rail, the line between Miramichi and Moncton must be open. Commitments and volumes are needed there as well," stresses Mr. Lévesque.