

2021, an excellent year for Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie Transporter shows record of 4,636 freight cars hauled for a 10% increase

○ Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie increased its freight traffic by 10% in 2021, to reach 4,636 carloads. The transporter under municipal control thus showed its best results in its history. In fact, one has to go back to 1998 to find a higher number of carloads along the Matapédia to Gaspé line.

Back in 1998, the line between Matapédia and Chandler belonged to Chemin de fer Baie-des-Chaleurs, a company controlled by the Quebec Railway Society. The section between Chandler and Gaspé belonged to the Corporation du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, the ancestor of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, or Gaspésie Railway Society.

In 1998, the Gaspesia mill in Chandler and Smurfit Stone's linerboard plant in New Richmond were still in operation, and the Murdochville copper smelter was still active as well. There were 5,653 carloads that year.

The 4,636 carloads of 2021 followed years of 4,323 carloads in 2018, 4,236 in 2019 and 4,202 in 2020. So, 2019 and 2020 were marked by small declines of 2% and 1% in traffic.

Luc Lévesque, director general of the transporter, is satisfied to see a 10% increase in the 2021 numbers.

"Our traffic has been either increasing or has been stable since 2013. Small drops of 1% or 2% mean stability. Year 2021 was the busiest year on the line in more than 20 years, in fact, in close to 25 years. It is very, very good but I still haven't reached the 5,000-carload mark yet. I sure hope that we will reach that milestone in 2022 because it will be hard to match for a certain period after 2022, considering that we will lose the windmill blade traffic next year," explains Mr. Lévesque.

LM Windpower, the blade manufacturer based in Gaspé,



Photo: G. Gagné

The director general of the SCFG, Luc Lévesque, is satisfied with the 2021 results but he wants an acceleration of the line upgrading in order to maintain and increase the current traffic

will switch to 107-metre-long units in 2023, and they will all be exported to the United States by ship. The current blades are 47 metres in length. LM Windpower has been exporting its whole production to the United States since the fall of 2016. Rail shipments started in December of that year and they have become the main source of revenues for the Gaspésie Railway Society, whose annual revenues hover around \$10 million. The blades are trucked from the Gaspé plant to the New Richmond transshipment facility because the line is under repair east of Caplan.

"We sure hope that in the not-so-distant future, we will haul blades again. In the meantime, we are working very hard at landing input traffic for LM Windpower or the Port Daniel cement plant. It is extremely hard to get that traffic because the transportation patterns are already in place. We know that yearly, hundreds of containers from overseas arrive at the LM plant in Gaspé by truck. They are trucked from Montreal. We would like to receive the containers in New Richmond and eventually in Gaspé," points out Mr. Lévesque.

The railway company prefers to not provide exact numbers about its customers'

traffic but the windmill blade traffic of 2021 was about stable compared to that of 2020, when 1,790 cars left to reach LM Windpower's American customers.

The cement traffic of Votorantim, the new name of the Port Daniel plant, was a tad smaller, carload-wise, than that of LM Windpower in 2021.

"In the case of the cement plant as well, there are big possibilities of getting our share of the input received by Votorantim but as long as the track is not reopened between New Richmond and Port Daniel, it will be very difficult to change current transportation patterns. We would also like to get the New Brunswick-bound cement traffic but as long as there is transshipment involved in New Richmond for a relatively short distance like Port Daniel-Moncton, we will likely not get it. CN also has to reopen on a regular basis its line between the Bathurst to Miramichi stretch for freight purposes," analyzes Mr. Lévesque.

Wood chips and lumber traffic were up

The main explanation behind the Gaspésie Railway Society traffic increase is linked to the Groupe Lebel sawmill in

Nouvelle, formerly known as Temrex. The plant was acquired on April 30 by a company based in Rivière-du-Loup, the same day Votorantim announced the official acquisition of the Port Daniel cement plant.

Groupe Lebel's woodchip traffic increased by 39% in 2021 compared to 2020, and lumber shipments also increased by 51%. Luc Lévesque doesn't release exact numbers in carloads in that case again, to the customers' request.

"The sawmill didn't reach traffic numbers but they are somewhat better than the 2020 numbers. The woodchip traffic is good because the (White Birch) Rivière-du-Loup paper mill is operating well. The lumber traffic depends on factors we have no control over," points out Mr. Lévesque.

He is still trying to land some of the Saint-Elzéar Association coopérative forestière sawmill lumber traffic and talks are regularly held on that topic but no agreement has been reached yet.

"We depend on Canadian National's rates because our traffic is shipped out of our line and that company's strategy is to increase its profits with the existing traffic. It means increasing rates," remarks Luc Lévesque.

He is anxious to see an acceleration in Transports

Québec's planning pace of upgrading works needed between Caplan and Gaspé. The ministry can count on a budget of \$280.8 million to realize that mandate, including \$45.8 million allotted by the federal government in August 2019.

"Since the announcement of the complete line refurbishment in May 2017, an amount of \$80 million has been spent and we cannot count on one additional mile of track," says Mr. Lévesque.

Transports Québec has not issued a single call for tenders for the restoration of a railway bridge since June 12, 2020, which is more than 19 months ago. Upgrading the bridges has been the designated priority of that line for close to 15 years.

A meeting with Transports Québec about the work that must be carried out on the line is scheduled for February 3.

In 2020, Transports Québec committed to reopening the line as far east as Port Daniel before the end of 2022, an unlikely outcome now, considering that four important bridges remain to be either replaced or upgraded between Caplan and the cement plant. Seven smaller structures must also be refurbished between the same points.

The passenger trains of VIA Rail will not come back as long as the line is not functional, at least to New Carlisle.



Photo: G. Gagné

The increase in lumber and wood chip traffic was the main factor behind the record numbers of 2021.